



Myth and politics in Thailand's cave rescue operation

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The twelve teenage football players who disappeared with their young coach on 23 June inside Chiang Rai's Tham Luang Nang Non cave have been found. The rescue operation – the biggest of its kind in Thailand – has involved well over 1,000 people, including soldiers, geologists, medical doctors, Japanese irrigation experts, Chinese lifesaving specialists, and British and Australian divers. The King and other members of the royal family have donated money and rescue items. Even the premier, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, flew to the site to show his support.

As the rescue operation takes on unprecedented proportions, stories of true heroism are assuming Buddhist undertones. But the realm of myth also betrays underlying political tensions.

The myth of the reclining princess

In Buddhist Thailand, the relationship between human and cave is one of domestication. Caves are thought to harbour a special kind of substance-like power, which may be accumulated by the virtuous men who dare to enter them. Ascetic religious practitioners like monks and hermits (*ruesi*) are among those daredevils. By meditating inside a cave, they tame the wild side of such power, transforming it into something that is beneficial to society. The shrines and offerings that can be seen inside caves throughout the kingdom are precisely meant to appease the spirits of whoever managed to domesticate that power, in exchange for their protection.

Tham Luang Nang Non – literally, “the reclining lady's big cave” – is inhabited by the spirit of a princess from the ancient local kingdom (*mueang*) of Chiang Rung. Myth has it that the princess was impregnated by a commoner and that she sought refuge inside the cave while running away from her father, the king, who disapproved of her lover. Her plan was to rest inside the cave until her lover returned with some food, but the man was killed by the king's soldiers. As he never got back to her, the princess stabbed herself to death. Her blood became the Mae Nam Mae Sai river, her reclining body becoming the Doi Nang Non mountain. She is now the guardian spirit (*jao thi*) of the cave – an obvious allusion to her own genitalia – and visitors are advised to worship her before venturing inside, or risk being killed by floods.

Myths, of course, always have political implications. This myth in particular carries a perceptible element of resistance to elite culture, and to the violence that allows kingdoms to come into being and sustain themselves. “Sovereign violence” in Thai history coincided with a process of centralisation, which subsumed localisms to the political, economic and cultural hegemony of Bangkok. Like the princess' child, a more egalitarian society in which elite culture could have married popular culture remains unborn.

But the myth also suggests that the locality still harbours some kind of power, to which even visitors from Bangkok must pay respect if they wish to be spared. The princess, after all, is still potent and demands to be worshipped. While instrumental relationships with the Bangkok administration are welcomed by the locality, the latter is not willing to be passively subsumed by central culture.

The Buddhification of the rescue operation

Operating in a context that is imbued with myth, the state-managed rescue efforts cannot be disentangled from their political dimension. As extraordinary numbers of soldiers “braved the cave”, the military state engaged in a symbolic battle against the spirit of the locality.

State authorities negated the princess’ existence altogether, dismissing the myth as “superstition” (*ngom gna*). Meanwhile, the rescue operation was narrated as a tale of heroism with Buddhist undertones. Rescuers were quickly praised for their selflessness, and social media users shared drawings in which bright halos emanate from their heads, reminiscent of the embodied meritorious power (*barami*) of Buddhist saints. Monks were invited to pray inside the cave. General Prayuth asked the blessings of the Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha, and a mass prayer vigil was organised at Bangkok’s Royal Plaza.

This Buddhist-inflected narrative echoes discourses that for centuries have depicted Bangkok’s takeover of the periphery in terms of a moral duty, which can only come to fruition by subsuming the supposedly uncivilised cults of the villagers to the purer form of religion that is represented by state-patronised Buddhism. As previously [argued on New Mandala](#), the line between Buddhism and “superstition” – in Thailand like elsewhere – is drawn by the interests of those in power.

It is almost as if the state-promoted narrative of the rescue operation sought to put an end to the existing myth, and replace it with a conclusion in which the centre is finally able to take over the unruly periphery. The desired outcome – the rescue of the young footballers – was ambiguously made to coincide with the assertion of central power.

Conclusion

The media’s spectacularisation of the rescue operation has been extremely successful in compelling Thais from across the social and political spectrum, as well as foreigners, to support a narrative that subtly replicates the model of state violence. For the first time since its rise to power in 2014, the military state has been able to secure undivided support for its symbolic takeover of the locality. With the successful rescue of the young footballers, the central state eventually conquered the wild and harmful periphery, subsuming its power. Our genuine rejoicing at the successful outcome should not prevent us from acknowledging its politicisation in a narrative that mobilises support for a history of state violence.

<http://www.newmandala.org/sceptres-instability-spirit-mediums-haunt-thailands-junta/>
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Sceptres of instability: why spirit mediums haunt Thailand’s junta

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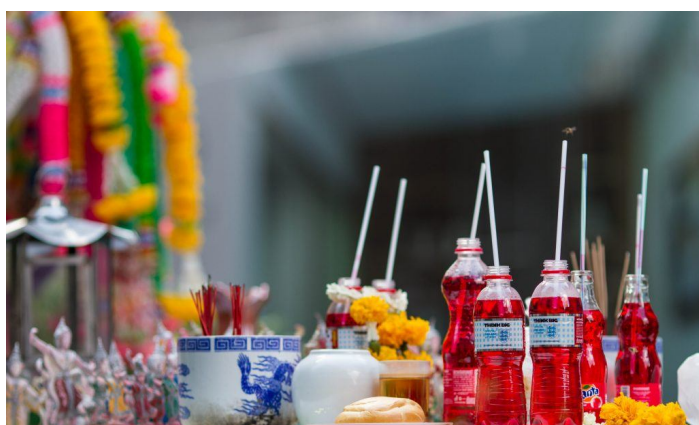


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In 2016, I published [a short article](#) in *Silapawattanatham Magazine* asking this question: to when can we trace the origins of spirit mediums who channel past Thai kings? Since the 2014 coup, I have documented even newer forms of spirit mediums, such as mediums who channel the spirits of celebrities and fictional characters (one popular spirit is Brian O’Conner from *Fast and Furious*). I argue these contemporary manifestations of spirit possession reflect a certain unsettledness in Thai society. Why are spirit mediums proliferating in this moment in time?

The reign of royal spirits

In Thailand, spirit mediums mainly channel the following five entities: Hindu deities, past kings, sacred ghosts, celebrities and fictional characters – for example, cartoons and characters from Thai soapies. Invoking ‘high’ spirits is nothing new. Traditionally, spirits channelled by mediums tended to be deceased noble leaders, individuals who had exercised influence in the local community, or ‘master’ spirits with awesome powers (though who these spirits once were cannot always be traced in historical annals).

But mediums that channel *royal* spirits are an extremely recent phenomenon, arising sometime during the last century. Evidence suggests they have existed since at least the 1950s, as shown in an interview conducted with one such medium named Chaomae Uraithong by the anthropologist Nibhawan Wirachnibhawan in 1987. That year, Chaomae Uraithong was 69 years old, but had been a spirit medium for 40 years already. She named 20 spirits that regularly possessed her body – most spoke Thai, but some spoke Chinese – and among these spirits included King Naresuan and Queen Consort Sunanda Kumariratana.

What do people place faith in the channeling of royal spirits, which these days is an extremely popular practice? The popular book *Who Killed King Thaksin* (still in print), written by Maechi Woramai Kabillasingha in 1973, sheds some light on the practice of conjuring deceased royalty. Maechi Woramai argues that King Taksin’s former lives encompassed those of Bao Zheng (from China’s Song Dynasty) and King Naresuan. The ambitious claim is staked through references and quotes from King Mongkut’s Royal Chronicles of Siam, and through a study of Taksin’s life-history.

It is perhaps difficult to believe that King Taksin was a reincarnation of Bao Zheng and King Naresuan, a claim for which there is no solid evidence. What matters is that Maechi Woramai reached her conclusions about reincarnation through a reading of the Royal Chronicles’ version of Thai history. The phenomena of spirit mediums such as Chaomae Uraithong, who choose to channel the spirits of past kings, are similarly predicated on popular beliefs that such individuals are exceptional heroes who have driven the nation’s history.

The Royal Chronicles are but one literary source that constructs royal figures as the heroes of the Thai nation. History textbooks exercise, in this regard, high influence. *The Geography of Siam*, a textbook published in 1925 towards the end of the reign of Rama 6, selects a number of important ‘heroes’ that are, incidentally or not, among those that the most famed spirit mediums channel: the Kings Naresuan, Taksin and Chulalongkorn.

Here, it is important to point out that the ordinary people learning about the heroic exploits of royal figures is – like spirit mediums channeling royal spirits – a recent phenomenon. Traditionally, the histories told in the Royal Chronicles were studied only by those with royal and noble lineage. Even now, most Thai people know only the protagonists of the most important historical legends, such as Pra Chao Uthong and Pra Rung.

Today, all the kings and royal figures who are most popular among spirit medium communities all prominent in history textbooks: Naresuan, Ekathotsarot, Narai, Taksin, Chulalongkorn, Abhakara Kiartivongse, and so on. It may be that the apotheosis of these figures as heroes, saviours of the nation and stability, has raised their sacredness to a level that is far beyond even that of a king. While some spirits are channelled regularly only in certain local regions (Camadevi, Ngam Mueang, Pha Mueang), these spirits are always connected to the history of the nation, as officially told.

Followers and clients of spirit mediums regularly pray to royal spirits for promotions and success in their careers, to be spared from military conscription and for wealth. On one hand, we can interpret burgeoning faith in royal spirits as reflecting beliefs that kings do exercise extraordinary power, as well as the popularity of the monarchy more broadly.

Yet when people rely on supernatural beings, this inevitably reflects a certain lack of faith in their own abilities and the environment in which they live. I argue that the popularity of royal spirits is booming among those who feel they cannot rely on Thailand’s current government to bring stability and a good life. The power of royal spirits can be a shortcut not only to one’s next promotion, but also for living safely under the current regime.

Bob Marley, Doraemon and other post-coup spirits

It may be hard to believe, but all the following pop culture icons are regularly invited to possess spirit mediums: deceased movie protagonists (such as Brian O’Conner from *Fast and Furious*), deceased singers (such as Bob Marley), folklore characters (such as Nang Phisuea Samut), characters from television soapies and even cartoons (such as Doraemon).

The question is not whether these spirit mediums are the real deal or phonies (each of us probably knows the answer in our hearts). The more interesting answer is: why do some people believe these spirits are real and that they exercise supernatural powers?

Those who worship “Shaman O’Conner” regularly ask the *Fast and Furious* character to predict their fortune, ask questions of fate and for winning lottery numbers. In a similar way, the reggae singer (“Shaman”) Bob Marley is

viewed by some as something of a sacred prophet, a phenomenon fueled perhaps by his songs of world peace. On some level, the interpolation of fictional characters and celebrities with supernatural powers is probably linked to processes of 'pop-culturalisation', whereby mass media raises certain figures to the status of idols.

But spirit mediums who channel celebrities and fictional characters began appearing in Thailand only around 2015 – or, after the 2014 coup. At first, I felt it was understandable that people were impelled by feelings of insecurity to find comfort in whatever spirits and entities they could. I thought that these forms of spirit mediums would die out – but they never did! As time has passed, more people have begun to voice concerns over the economy and come out to criticise the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Insecurity remains. Accordingly, we find that the lifespan of these spirit mediums is as long as that of the NCPO.

The question of Hindu deities

Like royal spirits, the popularity of mediums channelling Hindu deities is surging in Thailand, though they have been around for some time. I haven't traced their exact origins yet, but am certain mediums challenging Hindu deities have existed for at 50-60 years. For example, the Bangkok-based medium, Tao Maha Phrom, began channeling such spirits in 1972. Hindu deities who possessed her included Brahma and Shiva (other spirits who possessed her included Narai and the East Asian bodhisattva Guanyin).

I once presumed that mediums channeling Hindu deities was a phenomenon organic to Thailand, as I had interviewed an academic specialising in Indian studies who confirmed that India does not have such a tradition. But at the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies last year in Chiang Mai, another academic working in India informed me that the channeling of Hindu deities via mediums is a very old practice (most likely borne from the mixing of local beliefs with Hindu religious practice)!

The origins of the phenomena of Thai mediums channeling Hindu deities requires more research, but records show that both they and mediums who channel royal spirits became salient during the years 1947-1982. Interesting, these were years when Thailand was governed under dictatorial regimes, and when politics were particularly insecure. During this period, worship of Hindu deities flourished in Bangkok, as embodied in the building of the Erawan Shrine.

Three years ago, the spike in worshipping of Hindu deities could easily be correlated with the political turmoil that followed the 2014 coup. Now that time has passed, the pressures may be more dispersed – political, or due to the bad economy – but they are still driving people to rely on the benevolence of supernatural beings. Quick wealth, the granting of one's wishes and an easy release from life's burdens are all things that orthodox Buddhism does not allow for.

The NCPO's pessimistic spirits

Spirit mediums in Thailand disproportionately represent minority demographics, such as the poor and people with queer identities, who liable to experience discrimination. However, their status as spirit mediums confers a certain immunity from ridicule, since they are associated with deities and other supernatural beings: who would dare to mock them?

Whoever these people are, and whether they really do channel past kings or not, the puzzle is: why have new forms of spirit mediums proliferated over the past four years? And why did they only appear along with the emergence of the NCPO?

From my research into followers of spirit mediums, I have found that many believers feel a distinct insecurity induced by the state of Thailand's politics and the economy, which leads them to turn to the protections of past kings, Hindu gods and other entities with influence. The blessings of spirits are an easy way out, just as asking spirits for winning lottery numbers are a get-rich-quick solution in an economy that does not appear to reward the hard work of the poor and middle-class.

The effervescence of spirit mediums over the past four years reflects the inability of the NCPO to provide political, economic and emotional security for significant numbers of the Thai populace. For those who frequent spirit mediums, the sacred and the otherworldly can provide hope and the chance for a better future.

