

# The Witch Doctors of Chiangmai

Von Volkmar Zühlsdorff (z. Zt. Ottawa)

Der nachfolgende Beitrag mag bei oberflächlicher Lesung des Titels der „wissenschaftlichen“ Aura ermangeln. Tatsächlich handelt es sich um einen wichtigen, originalen Beitrag zur Erforschung der autochthonen Kultur der Thai. Unter der dünnen Patina des Theravāda-Buddhismus wird der gesamte Kulturbereich der Völker Südostasiens noch weitgehend von animistischen oder naturreligiösen Vorstellungen beeinflusst, wenn nicht gar bestimmt. Der Darlegung dieser Kulturschicht ist bisher zu wenig Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet worden – aus vielerlei Gründen, die hier aufzuzählen nicht der Ort ist. Die Herausgeber sind daher dankbar, daß Dr. Volkmar Zühlsdorff – langjähriger Diplomat an der deutschen Botschaft in Bangkok, ein hervorragender Landeskenner und einer, dem Thailand zur zweiten Heimat geworden, der daher mit dem nötigen Sensorium ausgestattet ist, das Unterschwellige in der Kultur eines fremden Volkes zu erfassen – seine persönlichen Beobachtungen zusammengefaßt und uns zur Veröffentlichung zur Verfügung gestellt hat.

K. Wenk, Hamburg

## I

Suddenly there was a shriek, then violent sobbing coming from among the dancers. It was a woman who was weeping convulsively, and as some of her companions were leading her to a simple bedstead, she pressed a cloth to her mouth to muffle her cries, while her body writhed and jumped as under the impact of an invisible whip. Someone took off her red head scarf, which she had donned Burmese style, and opened her dress to ease her breathing. Her eyes, from which tears poured forth, were firmly closed, her mouth was drawn with pain, her body humbly bent as though accepting an infliction without trying to ward it off or to escape. Then, after a few minutes, she relaxed. Drying her tears she got up, suffered the dancing dress she was wearing over her everyday clothes to be removed, and quietly as though nothing had happened, she walked off the crowded dance square.

„What did happen?“ I enquired. I was one among a large crowd of spectators – farmers, simple townspeople, friends, neighbours, relatives, two hundred perhaps in all. And many more watching from outside the fence.

„She offended the spirit that possesses her. While she was dancing, she still fooled around with some mortal in the audience. Therefore the spirit punished her.“

The scene was a house in Chiangmai, one of the stately wooden structures in the style of Northern Thailand, on pillars as a protection against floods during the

rainy season, airily built for natural ventilation which affords refreshment inside even during the most oppressive tropical hotspells. The large garden-courtyard was heavily shaded by mangotrees, banana bushes, palmtrees, *lamyais*, and rich with flowers. Some wooden planks had been laid out in a square on which people were dancing, perhaps twenty or thirty at a time when the floor was crowded. They were wearing the simple *sarong* of the country, but from time to time some of them dressed up with head scarfs, skirts and sashes in beautiful pastel colours, Burmese style. Most of the dancers were wearing dark glasses, as though the brilliant sunlight outside hurt their eyes.

One of the dancers stood out by her quiet dignity, the elegance and yet compelling forcefulness of her style – or was it a man? It was not easy to be sure, with the skirt-like *sarong* more or less the same among men and women. There was a self-assured masculine authority in the movement of the hands, as of one used to giving orders and being obeyed. Yet, the delicacy and grace in the turns of the slender body were those of a young lady. „You know who she is?“ someone asked me. „Her name is INPAN, she comes from Lampoon. She is possessed by the spirit of a Burmese prince.“ Here was a gathering of clairvoyants, soothsayers, witch doctors of the North, men and women with the second sight, or a sixth sense, or possessed by spirits, on June 15th, 1971. They hold their meeting every year, not for a day or two but for a whole month, and yet very few people know about it. There is no fanfare of publicity connected with it. I had heard of it only two hours before, on the day prior to my departure, and Prince SANIT RANGSIT who told me about it confessed that he, too, although he had been living in Chiangmai off and on for over thirty years, had not known about it, let alone ever attended such an event before.

There was no stir when we arrived, Prince SANIT Rangsit, and my host, Prince AJAVADIS DISKUL, both of whom usually provoke a flutter of ceremony and protocol wherever they attend in this courteous northern town, and also the somewhat conspicuous presence of myself as a „*Farang*“ went unnoticed or at least unacknowledged. I was glad about it. I could just stand among the crowd outside the fence at first, watching. After a while, I talked to people around me, and I learnt that those who danced today were possessed by the spirits of some Burmese who had been killed in battle. They did not say exactly when but I came to understand, with the assistance of Prince AJAVADIS who kindly interpreted the Lao dialect, that they were not casualties of the last war but rather of the numerous skirmishes and battles in former centuries up to the destruction of the old Thai capital Ayuthaya in 1767.

„Why do they take possession of you, so long after their death“, I asked. „Why do they not get reincarnated to live again, in their own bodies?“ – These were the spirits of heroes and great men, was the answer. They returned, perturbed because they had been unable in life to accomplish their designs, due to an untimely death. Eventually, they would again be reincarnated.

By then I had gradually come forward from the periphery of spectators into the courtyard, and I was invited to take my place on the steps of the staircase at

the side of the house leading up to the living quarters. Here I had a perfect view of the proceedings. Now I noticed for the first time a woman in white, down there on the square, her eyes hidden behind dark glasses, too. Sometimes her head, or an arm, or a finger moved in the rhythm of the dance, but mostly she sat motionless. The lady of the house, so I was told, who had arranged this ceremony. To me it seemed that she was at the center of it all, in command in more than one sense. Most of the time she seemed in deep meditation, in trance perhaps. Some force seemed to emanate from her which quietly directed all that happened and kept people going. The sequence of events, the change of tunes, very subtle sometimes and then again striking, the selection of dances – all this somehow seemed to emanate from her.

Inside the house, as I could observe through open spaces between the matting, people were busy preparing food and refreshments for the dancers. From time to time some of these came over from the floor to partake of it, and also to change their wet clothes or to don some other costume, as the progression of the ceremony might require.

The music down at the courtyard had changed in sound and rhythm, it was quicker now, hard and militant. They were engaged in a Burmese sword dance. Attention focused on one dancer who surpassed all others by the vigour and daring of his movements, by his lightning thrusts and high jumps, turning around in midair to take on an imaginary second or third assailant. Fighting with one sword at first, then two, three, and finally four. Then, when he stopped and stood motionless the crowd became intensely quiet. Holding one sword, then two between his teeth, he lifted the other blades high up, then let them come down on his shoulders left and right of his neck, resting their pointed tips heavily in the soft mould behind his collar bones. And in this posture he started to dance again. Others, equally in trance, pushed blades into their stomachs, or threw themselves on their swords as in a Roman form of suicide, while still others added their weight in pushing them down on the blades – and yet, there was no wound or injury from the sharp, live weapons, not the least. I had seen something like this only once before, in Bali, when they performed the *Ketsut* dance.

When this daring sword dancer passed by me on the stairs, I was surprised to notice that he seemed suddenly listless and rather aged. I spoke to him about it. „What do you mean?“ came the reply. „I am a woman, sixty years old! But the spirit that possesses me when I dance is that of a young warrior. That is why he makes me do the sword dance, in his own way and manner.“

The sun was setting by then, soon the ceremony would be over for the day. I threw another glance to INPAN who was on the floor again. Suddenly, she threw up her arms and started to cry, sobbing convulsively like the dancer who had been punished by the spirit when we arrived. She lay down on the prepared place until she could calm herself, then she was quickly led away by two older women. A few moments later I saw her, in ordinary dress this time on the far end of the courtyard, leaving for home.

When I turned to go, a tall witch doctor came over to embrace and kiss me, Thai style, and to invite me back to their festival – tomorrow, or next year, whenever I should be in the country again.

## II

In January 1972 I was back in Chiangmai for another visit. Through the kind assistance of Prince AJAVADIS DISKUL, INPAN had been traced to her home in Lampon, where she lived with her parents PIMPA and MA, and her husband PRASERT. When I went to see her on January 14, she received us in a small, one-room wooden house on stilts, Northern Thai style, which had been built for her apart from the family living quarters. It served as a place where she could see visitors who were asking for guidance and help while she was in trance – possessed, as she told us, by the spirit of ČAO SAEN KAMLUE, a princely knight who was killed in battle and died together with his Queen ČAMDEVI of Lampon. This city, prior to the founding of Chiangmai, had been the capital of the Northern kingdom of *Lanna*.

When Prince AJAVADIS and I talked to INPAN, NAI TONGKAM, the driver, helped out interpreting whenever the Lao dialect left not merely myself but also the Prince puzzled. Also present were her mother and another woman who had obtained help from ČAO SAEN and who now served him by making herself useful during the reception of visitors.

„Why did it take you eight months until you came to see me?“ INPAN put that reproachful question to me with an inflection of urgency, almost as if she were asking for an explanation. Her approach would have been surprising in its challenging bluntness had it come from the daughter of a simple peasant but, being in trance, it was not she who talked to us, they said, but ČAO SAEN KAMLUE through her. Indeed, her distinctive silk dress, Burmese style, her aristocratic bearing and her self-assured manner of speech projected an impression very different from the unassuming country girl, talking with embarrassed bursts of laughter whom we were to meet the following day. That was a Buddhist holiday, which ČAO SAEN, as most of the spirits here, was wont to respect – except, as INPAN explained, in cases of emergency when someone was in need of his immediate intervention.

I was pleased about that chance the next day to talk to INPAN by herself alone, in her natural condition while not being possessed, because I wanted to hear from her, how it had all come about. On this „day off“ she was free to do her household chores as any other woman would, and she seemed to enjoy them. She had just returned from taking her little son, two years old, to the village kindergarten when we met her. Strangely enough, she did not recognize me this time while not in trance. Neither did she remember our encounter the year before or, for that matter, any of her fellow dancers during that meeting. As to the latter, she explained that all those who assemble in Chiangmai each year from all over Thailand do not know each other in ordinary life, yet they are an intimate community while in trance because of the spirits who possess them.

INPAN assured us that she had never wanted to become a medium, nor had she ever given such matters any thought until „the trouble started“. That was when she was fourteen. She had been a perfectly normal child up to then, her parents said. From her mother very little information beyond that could be extracted – a quiet woman, unusually shy and withdrawn, with hardly ever a smile on her face. She seemed content to exist in the shadow of her daughter and of the spirit possessing her. Only her eyes were remarkable, gazing rigidly somewhere in the distance. Had one not known, one would have picked her as the medium much rather than her vivacious daughter with the frequent laughter and quick sense of humor. NAI PIMPA, the father, on the other hand, friendly, open, communicative, was a man who had his two feet firmly on the ground. He made no bones about being somewhat annoyed by this whole business of his daughter being „bewitched“. It went against his grain. His family had lived around here for generations with never a case like this, he told us and he intimated that this „irregularity“ must have sneaked in through his wife who came to Lampon from some other district. In any case, just as INPAN had struggled almost desperately against the infliction, so the father did whatever he could to help his child. In fact, he sold a fair part of his land in order to be able to pay all the doctors' and hospital bills for her.

Despite thorough examinations both in Lampon and Chiangmai physicians were unable to find any medical cause for INPAN's illness – headaches, dizziness, vomiting and all kinds of inexplicable sores and pains. There seemed to be nothing wrong with her organically. For a while she went to work in a shop, both in the hope that the distraction might prove helpful and also because they needed the money, but she got ill and her parents had to keep her at home frequently so that after one month she was dismissed.

INPAN became more and more moody, strange in her ways and reactions so that her father was finally convinced she must be a mental case. He sent her to the best psychiatrist at Chiangmai hospital. But the moment INPAN entered his office she felt perfectly well again. The doctor asked her what day it was, to which she replied, quite correctly, Tuesday, August 27, 2509 of the Buddhist era (1962 A.D.). After putting her through the probes and tests modern science has devised, he dismissed her as entirely sane and normal by medical standards. She did not even have to take any medicine, INPAN reported. But hardly out of the hospital she felt as though someone struck a blow at her head, so hard that she was dazed, she ran all the way back to Lampon and did not properly come to until she finally reached home again.

INPAN did not say how she became first aware that the troubles stemmed from a spirit wanting to possess her. In any case, she did not give in easily; a long struggle still followed before she finally yielded to the prince of old. Ever since she did, her health has been alright and never giving her trouble again. Today she feels well, content and serene. The losses incurred through her illness have been more than made up by the offerings of people seeking help, and when we were there a new house was just being built for her brother, then serving the customary period as a Buddhist monk before getting married. ČAO SAEN, so INPAN confided,

also took a hand in bringing her together with her husband, an engineer from Čomtong who was then working with a construction team on the new super-highway from Lampon to Chiangmai. Since this was completed recently, he has been employed at a food market.

There is little that is extraordinary or perplexing about INPAN when she „officialiates“ in a corner of her simple country-style abode – no weird ceremonies, no mystifying paraphernalia. A plate with joss sticks and matches, some flowers delicately arranged, a stack of clothes Burmese style, a spittoon, the two swords she sometimes uses while dancing. Curious people, children and grownups alike, are usually looking in from the outside, talking gaily and unabashed, spirit or no spirit. Of course, they will never be obtrusive, but this these gentle Thai people with their natural courtesy would not ever be in any case.

During our encounter the year before I had seen INPAN only once. This time I had the good fortune of meeting her on three days, twice in trance. Prince AJAVADIS took some photos, we asked questions, and we even received permission to tape some of our conversations with her while she was possessed. On the third morning INPAN was still in her normal state when we arrived. When she decided she was ready for the session she lighted twelve joss sticks, called ČAO SAEN KAMLUE (or *Čao Pø*, „Prince Father“ for short) with polite greetings in the Thai manner, then waited while still chatting with us. After a while she fell silent. Suddenly she gasped for breath a few times, gurgling up air, then some liquid which she, apologizing to us and turning towards the wall, emptied into the spittoon. Quietly she started to put on a Burmese dress in yellow and blue, *Čao Pø*'s favorite colours.

This was the way it always happened, INPAN said, when the spirit took possession of her, pressing on her stomach. It seems much less of a dramatic occurrence than when he leaves a person again. We did not stay long enough for this on that day, but I had witnessed it twice the year before – the shrieks and violent sobbing while the bodies of the possessed were writhing and jumping convulsively as under the impact of an invisible whip. No wonder that the bystanders, simple people from Chiangmai, had been convinced that punishment was being meted out to the possessed for some wrongdoing that might have incurred the Spirits' displeasure. But in fact it was merely, INPAN assured us, the normal way of the spirits extricating themselves again from intimate union with human beings after possession.

Occasionally, *Čao Pø* would indeed discipline her, INPAN admitted, as he had done when she tried to run away from him seeking assistance at the hospital. Punishment might be necessary sometimes, she felt, like in the relation between pupil and teacher, but beyond this she would not elaborate.

Who, then, was this spirit, Čao Saen Kamlue, who so deliberately took possession of a human being, bending her to his will gently but relentlessly?

What did he say of himself? – A princely knight, son of Prince HONGKAMDUNG from Lampon and his wife WAENKAEO, the third among fourteen brothers (all their names were duly enumerated to us), a troop commander at the right band

of the famous, if legendary, Queen ČAMDEVI of Lampoon. And he had died together with his Queen in a long battle of many days and many nights against the King of MALANGKA at the foot of Mount Suthep near Chiangmai.

Was Čao Saen from Burma, as people believed, because INPAN when possessed was always dressing Burmese style? – He was not, but one day in the heat of that last battle he took a bath in the river, and when he returned, his garb had been taken away by a Burmese nobleman who chivalrously left his own behind for him to wear. In this Burmese dress Čao Pø was killed soon after, fighting, and ever since he must appear as he did when his life was consummated.

If he died so long ago, why, instead of taking possession of INPAN did he not incarnate himself again, in his own body? – He would, but one cannot die and be born as one pleases. One has to fulfill one's destiny. Čao Pø's assignment was to help, to this he was duty bound. He could not help through the physical body, but only through the soul. What counted was what one achieved, and by human standards Čao Pø had perhaps done the work of five hundred human lives already since he had died. Five thousand years after his death he would be born again in the flesh.

When Čao Pø helped someone, did he do it of his own, or in the name of someone else? – He received his orders from the gods above, from the Highest. When he needed to know he asked, when he required help it was given to him.

Seeing that at this time Thailand was threatened from the outside, what would be the country's future fate? – „There will be ups and downs, like in the level of a river. If our Thai people gather all their strength, if they dam up the water, they may be able to contain the flood. The Thais are strong enough for this. The human plane and the gods helping together, disaster may be warded off.“

Will there be trouble? – „We shall not go under. Things may go on as they are now for some time.“

Will the states around Thailand, here in Asia, be able to maintain peace? – „They are partly asleep, partly alert. They must all work together in a common effort. Čao Pø and five hundred like him will help Thailand again and again.“

What we wanted to know next was a little delicate, and Prince AJAVADIS put the question with due apologies: When the spirit made his choice for a medium (a „horse to ride“, as the Thai expression goes), did he select one or more persons? And could he switch if he so wished? – He selected only one person, was the answer; he could change but he rarely did. Before INPAN he had possessed two other women from Lampoon in succession, each up to the end of their lives.

I asked to convey to INPAN and her spirit not merely my courteous thanks but also the assurance that I would pray for them. I noticed that Prince AJAVADIS when translating this message was interrupted by INPAN who started to talk intensely about some entirely different matter. When she had finished, I calmly urged the Prince to convey my message once again, to completion, which he kindly did. INPAN made no reply. Instead she suddenly jumped to her feet, reached for the two Burmese swords behind her and after some heroic shadow fighting she ran first the one, then the other sword into her body, with a Harakiri like

gesture, pushing with both hands. There was an awed silence among the spectators around, then a gasp – but the blades, just as I had witnessed during the dance the year before, bent but did not hurt her. Not even her silk dress was cut or damaged in any way.

„Why did she do that?“ Prince AJAVADIS asked, perplexed, when we were on our way home. To me, the gesture seemed plain enough: a proud answer to my offer of prayers. If any praying for, or helping anyone were needed around here, it was done by *Čao Pø*, who himself needed no assistance. In order to impress this on me, that demonstration of magic power rendering immune against steel was staged, for my benefit.





Inpan in Trance

Januar 1972 in Lamphün aufgenommen