

The war of spiritual forces that control Thai politics

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Some months ago, Chang Noi was invited to a dinner with a speech by a leading technocrat and former minister of finance. The event was attended by businessmen, senior officials, and politicians. By chance, Chang Noi was seated beside the brother of another leading technocrat and former minister of finance. Throughout the meal and the speech, he talked of various spirit mediums who could offer insight on political events and the future of the realm. He handed over business cards of some of them. He offered to be personal escort to a meeting with one medium of exceptional power.

For many people, the last two years have seen an epic battle over the fate of the nation. On one side are forces associated with the “third hand that can not be seen”. On the other are forces associated with “London.” This is not to say that any such battle has been taking place in reality, but that is how things have appeared in the popular imagination, and not only for the “man in the street” but also for the man in the conservative suit with the Lions Club lapel badge. This tale is not about reality, but about belief, or about how to talk about things that are unmentionable.

The tale starts over two centuries ago at the foundation of Bangkok. There was a sacrificial event at the erection of the city pillar. Such ceremonies draw on old beliefs about the spiritual force vested in the earth. The sacrifice is required to placate these spirits so they offer their protection to the realm. Unhappily, a green snake slid into the hole along with the offerings.

This has been the cause of difficulty for the realm and ruling elites ever since, requiring propitiation of those gods who have the power to combat this sort of misfortune. Two gods were selected for this role. The first is the “flower Brahma.” In Hindu mythology, while Vishnu was lying asleep on a serpent, a lotus flower sprouted from his navel. Brahma was incarnated in this lotus, seated in a position of deep meditation, and went on to recreate the world. In India, the idea of a “flower Brahma” seems unknown. But in the Thai adaptation, the phrase means a meditating Brahma of special power – enough power to recreate the world.

The second god is Vishnu, or Narai in the Thai tradition. During the churning of the sea of milk to create the life force for the world, he stands at the very centre, imperiously directing the whole event with his four arms. As with the “flower Brahma,” this is an image connected to the power of creation.

On 21 March 2006, the statue of Brahma known as the Erawan shrine was smashed by hammer blows. Of course the statue was originally the guardian spirit for a hotel. Such shrines draw on the same beliefs that underlie the city pillar. Probably because the shrine was located at an intersection that became a centre of the city, the statue unofficially took on a role of protecting much more than just a hotel. The attack came at a time of extreme political tension. The controversial 2006 election was two weeks ahead. Mobs were on the streets. According to this interpretation, the incident was not the work of a deranged vandal, but a deliberate attack on one of the key spiritual forces behind the camp of the invisible hand. Thus, the attacker was immediately killed, and the incident was never properly explained in public.

Now fast forward two years to early 2008. At the magnificent sanctuary of Phanom Rung, there is a famous lintel which depicts not only Vishnu reclining on a serpent and contemplating the recreation of the world, but also the moment of Brahma's incarnation in a lotus sprouting from Vishnu's navel. Possibly this lintel was what attracted some military men who reportedly visited Phanom Rung and carried out ceremonies to improve the fortunes of the elites and the realm.

But some time after their visit, there was a counter-attack, again at a time of gathering political tension, only a week before the court decision that dissolved Thai Rak Thai. Some people entered the Phanom Rung complex at night, moved and broke an elaborate bull-and-lingam, defaced the mouths of eleven naga snakes, damaged two lions, and broke the hands on two guardian spirits. In this interpretation, this vandalism was an attempt to undo the earlier propitiation of Vishnu and Brahma, and marshal the spiritual forces on the side of "London." This again explains why the whole event seems to have been hushed up.

The explanation continues like this. The Buriram faction were not early supporters of Thaksin. In fact it was one of the last to fall into line, just before the 2005 election. And yet in 2006, its faction leader became Thaksin's chief lieutenant. That was not (according to this story) because of his political skills but his spiritual contacts. Buriram is a Khmer-speaking area. In the Thai imagination, the Khmer world is a source of great spiritual power, especially associated with Angkor. Partly that power is associated with Siva, who is so prominent at Angkor. The bull-lingam that featured in the Phanom Rung desecration is a representation of Siva. The snakes are his protectors. By rumor, the faction leader provided a statue of Kali, a powerful representation of Siva's wife, in one of "London's" household shrines. In the Thai view, the Khmer are also associated with the darker kinds of spiritual practice. That explains the violence at Phanom Rung.

Finally, how did Samak rise to the premiership. According to this interpretation, Samak is a devotee of the flower Brahma. Shortly before the election he was allegedly seen attending one of the major shrines to this image for an intense ceremony.

If you follow this tale, it explains why politics have been so tense, why "London" has fallen low, why the Buriram faction has risen, and why Samak has become prime minister.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/gods.htm>