

The Efficacy of Fear – Forest Spirits

This story is composed of interviews with several informants in Rasi Salai District in Sisaket Province. In Thailand and Laos, it is believed that spirits reside on any land or forest. A small shrine is always set up in the grounds of a house to honor the spirit of the land. In Northeast Thailand, many villages also have a forest, known as a don phutha (ancestral forest), which is revered as sacred ground. The two forests of Don Phudin and Don Phudaen, introduced here, lie alongside the Mun River, a tributary of the Mekong. It is believed that the spirits of the people, known as Chao Pho, who were once the royal family of Laos, live in and protect these forests.

The majority of the population inhabiting these and similar forests, which are held in great awe by the people, are mainly ethnic Lao, who are to be found throughout Northeastern Thailand as well as in the central and southern areas of Laos. These people help to keep the forests in good condition, even in fast-developing Northeastern Thailand. In order to improve their lives, the people are always making use of the forest, and appear to believe that they can control the spirits by performing religious rites (for example, when building a house on the land or when clearing the forest to make a field). In Don Phudin and Don Phudaen, however, there are taboos that strongly inhibit the use of natural resources. From listening to the villagers' stories, it was possible to understand their feelings of reverence toward the forest and their desire to protect it, which also provides them with the spiritual support they need in their efforts to prevent rampant development by companies.

A story about cutting down trees in Don Phudin

Until several years ago I was very self-centered. As there were good trees in Don Phudin, I went with my friend to cut some of them down to make a stairway for my house. As we were coming out of the forest, my friend said, "There is a person in white clothes following us." However, I could not see the person and asked angrily, "What are you afraid of?" When we reached the house, I suddenly collapsed with a fever. I went to see the doctor, but was told that I was not sick. My stomach ached. I had diarrhea and an especially bad fever. I then decided to consult *Naan Thiam* (a woman possessed by one of the *Chao Pho*).

"You stole wood from Don Phudin, did you not? The *Chao Pho* are furious. You will die if you do not apologize," she intoned. After making an offering of a pig's head and four bottles of rice wine (the number of the pig's legs) I was completely cured.

Even now, lots of villagers die from such curses. Despite the fact that his father was a *djam* (an intermediary who mediates between the villagers and the possessed people), one man wanted to build a sturdy house, but died when he cut down a big tree in the forest. That was 40 or 50 years ago. In these cases, pleading with the spirits after the fact is of no use. Breaking taboos even though you do not know about them is a grave sin.

Keeping promises

In 2013, the racing boat kept at the shrine was supposed to be repainted, but the paint ran out part way through the job and the village headman simply abandoned it. That evening, I went out to fish with a tangle net and was attacked by a ghost at about seven o'clock at night. The same thing happened again the next day, which I thought was strange, but asking around I found that the boat repainting work had not been completed. Since it was possible that this might result in other problems, I went around the village asking for donations and finished the job. If you once tell the *Chao Pho* you are going to do something, you must never fail to see it through to the end.

The Mun River *Tham* (Cavern)

The Mekong River, its tributary the Mun River, and Mun's tributary the Chi River, are linked together by underground caverns. These are known as the *Tham Phayanaak* (caverns of the naga/dragon"). The cavern in this area is linked to the cavern in Nong Khai Province (in the northern part of Northeastern Thailand, near Vientiane). The *Chao Pho* came to this area by way of these caverns. Many years ago, there was trade by boats that came up the Mun River from the Mekong River, and so there are places where there is sunken treasure. People who have found gold on the riverbed in this area have died two or three days later if they took it home with them. This is not a problem if the spirits have given the gold as a gift, but if the gift is not accepted when it is offered, it cannot be found if the person goes back to look for it later.

Protecting the forest

A company dredging sand for construction started work on the Mun River right in front of the village. The company received permission from the village headman, but the villagers were not informed about it until later. Fishing was affected, and the coming and going of the trucks carrying the sand out caused a large number of cracks to appear in the village roads. The road in front of the kindergarten was also damaged, and the trucks were not permitted to pass that

way. The company then built a separate road which passed through the forest, and the damage to the village ceased.

After a while, however, the damage began to occur again. I looked at the documents and realized that it was not clear how far the company was permitted to carry out its operations. After I started to look into the matter, I began to receive death threats from people related to the company. I then consulted with a villager I knew well, and we decided to get the company to leave the village area. That was nine years ago.

At first, we had no idea how to go about doing this, but we blocked the road to stop the transport of sand out of the village. This turned into a huge commotion, with even the provincial governor turning up to mediate, though no agreement was reached and the blockade continued. The company was dredging sand out of the Mun River in several places without knowing where the boundaries of the permitted area were. Even the province said that they did not have firm knowledge of the area (i.e., in square kilometers) for operations of the company. In the end, after blockading the road for a week, the villagers' demands were met. The villagers were absolutely terrified that erosion of the riverbank caused by the dredging would result in trees collapsing in the forest. The owner of the company had been paying his respects to the *Chao Pho* shrine by making annual offerings of a pig's head, rice wine and other goods. At the same time, though, he was destroying the environment, and that was unacceptable. The villagers were angry about the possibility of becoming ill from the sand dust and about the impact on the forest from the dredging. Before blocking the road, we consulted the *Chao Pho* and prayed that none of the villagers would be arrested.

The relationship of the villagers with the forest

Because they protect us, I feel no need to run away from the *Chao Pho* even if they punish us. When villagers set out on a long trip and when they return they go and pray at the shrine. We also pray at the shrines twice a year, on a Wednesday or Thursday at the end of the rainy season, going first to the Don Phudaen shrine. The other time is during May of the lunar calendar. The forest is protected by *thaep* (angels). We cannot see them, but they can see us. There are also lots of medicinal herbs in the forest.

In the past, to prevent people from cutting down trees and stealing the timber, we would tie a thief up at the edge of the forest and ask the *Chao Pho* to come and break the person's legs. Once, when I brought wood home myself, unwittingly forgetting to ask for permission, I

dropped the timber on my legs and could not walk. I remembered that I had not asked for permission and apologized to the *Chao Pho*. I was then able to walk home on what should have been my broken legs. My legs healed in about a week.

If an outsider who does not know about the taboos cuts down trees, the villagers will be punished. This is a reproach from the *Chao Pho* for not protecting the forest properly. The villagers are therefore very watchful to see that nothing like that happens.