

DON'T PLAY WITH FOOD: AN ANECDOTE ABOUT UNDERSTANDING SPIRIT BELIEF

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The problem of understanding spirit belief in Southeast Asia is intriguing. It is as fundamental for understanding regional nature relations as it is for understanding oneself. This makes it a veritable mess to investigate. Spirits are not only common, even central agents in Southeast Asian ecologies; they are also attractive, appealing to the desires of observers, researchers or tourists, who are disillusioned about modernism and its discontents. In understanding spirit belief, that is, the identity and alterity of research “object” and subject entwine inextricably so that the clarification of locally specific ecologies comes with a blurring of the boundaries of the research process itself.



Entrance to the spirit forest

I will not deal with this mess systematically here because I cannot. I would rather relate an anecdote as a case in point. It is set in the National Protected Area of Dong Phou Vieng in southern Laos, in a village of the Katang ethnic group and adjacent to a spirit forest that was my focus of investigation but which is of minor importance here (see Kleinod 2014 and forthcoming). Among other things, I wondered whether the claim by conservationists was true – that, partly because of clandestine evangelization, spirit

belief is on the decline – with serious implications for the endangered monkey species which inhabit the spirit forest. But: was spirit belief truly in decline? How to find out?

I would soon get a hint. The scale of spiritual concern in Katang communities became clear on the second day of my 2014 fieldtrip. During a village walk a thunderstorm approached so that my informants and I went to take shelter under the stilt-house of my host, the village head, or *naaibaan*. Upon return, I was obligated to buy lizard (*laen*) for dinner from our hosts: I was with a bunch of policemen and a district official (“for my safety”); and my informant advised me that serving wildlife when officials are present is standard procedure. When the animal was brought to us, neatly tied up, I felt the irresistible touristic urge to take pictures of it. The thunderstorm seriously drew in, more severe than either my assistant or I had ever experienced before. Some of the policemen, Katang themselves, became visibly afraid, and especially when lightning hit the simple electrics of the house under which we were taking shelter, causing sparks to fly.



Not to be played with

After the storm was over, villagers were agitated about a tree hit by lightning, not far from our position. The charred mark on the bottom of its trunk was sure a sign that *phanya in* (Lord Indra) was angry with me for taking pictures of the lizard. Villagers kept making gestures of photographing followed by rubbing their neck with the side of a hand. I understood that Indra

was going to kill me, for lizards are food, a serious matter not to be played with. The policemen were quick to downplay to me the seriousness of it all, claiming that the villagers were of course only joking and that this was just their culture (*watthanatham*) – in other words, harmless custom. I was not so sure about this explanation, which became even less convincing when the storm returned: we were just conducting a group interview when another lightning strike hit the house so that it shook. The *naaibaan*, obviously afraid, jumped up and at once cancelled the session. Fearing that I might be killed in his house by Indra, we had to immediately perform a ritual of my submission to Lord Indra's power: we all held hands and the *naaibaan* approached me with a large knife, which he then rubbed with its blunt side across the side of my neck. So that was what villagers were trying to tell me. And believe it or not, the storm receded.



The *naaibaan*'s house

This experience verified to me the existence of spirit belief among these villagers. But it also showed, and in quite an intense way at that, what had occurred to me already before: that when dealing with “superstitions” you may become superstitious yourself. Or at least I do. For example, although I am officially a baptized and confirmed Protestant, I usually avoid attending

church services and place myself somewhere between atheism and agnosticism – but when in Laos, not the last thing to do before heading for the field was visiting Vat Sii Meuang to seek protection for safe passage by Chao Mae Sii Meuang, the guardian spirit of Laos' economic, political and cultural center, Vientiane. To return to the story, the thunderstorm had abated somewhat in its force but remained strong enough to make me worry about going outside (which was at some point necessary in order to wash or go to the “toilet”) – not just because I could be hit by lightning but also because of You Know Who. Could the forces on my side – the Christian God, my uncertain disbelief, and Mae Sii Meuang, protectress of a “civilized” lowland Lao polity – truly brave this fearsome and “wild” Hindu-Lao-Katang master of the peripheral upland sky? Who could be sure...?

So, what about spirit belief in Southeast Asia? Instead of truly succumbing to Lord Indra's power, let us turn materialistic for a change. Apart from problems with the term “spirit” in the Lao context, the term “belief” is quite blurry and misleading: what was written over the *naaibaan*'s face when he jumped up was not belief but, more precisely, genuine fear. Fear thus seems more adequate here, and it calls for profane pragmatism rather than religious dedication and faith. This fear more or less directly derives from the brute conditions of existence: for the researcher as much as for those researched, a thunderstorm in a rural Lao village, given the lack of brick houses and lightning conductors, is of an experiential quality very different from one in a “developed” town or city. Spiritual fear is, first of all, a function of existentially being *at the mercy of* something or somebody, it echoes existential precariousness.

There is thus an overlap of research subject and “object” which can be carried even further. During its history, Western culture had sought to eradicate animism, but it seems that the unfolding crisis of scientific instrumentalism serving sustained capital accumulation, and the growing severity of its unintended consequences, increasingly lay bare the deadly contradictions and limitations of capitalist culture – which brings us back to a state of being existentially at

the mercy, not of the immediate “natural” environment but of an uncontrolled, exhausting global social system. And that is my final point: spirit belief may mean similar but different things for Westerners and Katang. While, for rather abstract reasons like the “ecological crisis” etc., the former somehow “want to believe” in spirits for the “alternative cosmology” they embody and the related utopian hope they carry, the latter might be happy to escape the immediate ecological precarity and fear that spirits mean to them. And if they did, who would be in a position to judge?