

## GHOSTS IN THE BANGKOK NIGHT

by Edoardo Siani (SOAS, University of London)

Are ghosts 'modern'? Does it make sense to talk about ghosts in the contemporary world? Is there any good reason for ghosts to exist today?

Sometimes I have the feeling of having worked with ghosts in Thailand. The people I have conducted research with in Bangkok – diviners – are, after all, ghosts. I could see that very clearly every night, when, as the sun set quickly over the city, I reached the place anthropologists refer to as 'the field'. In this case, this was a market that clutters the footpaths around a shrine, at the feet of the spectacular skyscrapers that are typical of the downtown areas. Popular among Thai people of all age groups and social strata, the market comes to life at night, as approximately forty diviners take a seat at their tables in order to receive the first customers of the day.

The fact that the diviners I have worked with offer their services after dark should not be too surprising given that, in spite of their undisputed popularity, they are often portrayed in Thai society itself as exponents of a lesser form of religiosity, if not as residues of an 'uncivilized' past that the country would be better off without. As Schnepel (2006) wrote, the ambiguous character of the night provides societies with a spatio-temporal dimension where/when the rules that govern public life are somewhat suspended. The Bangkok night, whose unique 'noir' flavour conveys an impression of lawlessness and abandon, plays a crucial role precisely in giving diviners as much as their clients an opportunity to meet in a public space that is less subjected to social scrutiny.

I remember that, on the first occasions when I went to conduct my fieldwork with the diviners at the market, the sight of the diviners' physical personas illuminated by their portable lamps along the dark footpaths elicited unusual sensations in me. More than once, I attempted to qualify their presence in my field notes, and the adjective I jotted down most often was 'ghostly'. Perhaps not surprisingly, a diviner also used the

word 'ghost' to describe their ambiguous condition. We were talking about that form of hiding that many of them resort to during daylight in order to escape public judgement, when she noted that '[Only] a ghost sees a ghost' (*phi hen phi*). This expression is customarily employed by social groups that suffer from some form of stigmatization in Thailand, in order to suggest that, regardless of a great deal of self-imposed invisibility, these individuals are still able to recognize one another in all circumstances. To be a ghost, in this context, is therefore a strategy that Thai diviners and other marginalized groups employ in order to escape public shaming in a society that often perpetuates repressive discourses towards the Others of the day, whilst at the same time keeping the door open for them to assert their identities whenever possible – just like when Thai diviners provocatively light a lamp along the sidewalk at night, or when they recognize one another in a crowd.

Contemporary Thai ghosts exist in a less figurative form as well. More concrete – if this is the right word – kinds of ghosts can indeed be found everywhere in the kingdom – in banana trees in rural areas as much as along the high-streets of Bangkok. These ghosts are supposedly invisible, and yet nearly every Thai person will swear to have glimpsed one. They are often described as being like corpses of individuals who died in violent circumstances – with black circles around their eyes and purulent wounds exposed – but some of them are able to take on the appearance of irresistible young ladies. Ghosts are also said to exist in a variety of shapes, some varying from region to region. Some of the diviners I worked with claimed to be able to regularly see these ghosts. Indeed, seeing them often becomes an integral part of the very services they offer.

One night, I was sitting at the table of a diviner at the market, when an attractive young woman approached him asking for a reading. She was one of the many young women who regularly visit the shrine: my diviner friend and I spoke often about them. Some of them had made it to the very world of the skyscrapers that many people in Thailand can only dream of. They walked along the footpath among us, and yet

they appeared to belong to another world. That night, however, something deeply disturbing and extremely revealing happened, as my diviner friend noticed a ghost hanging from the shoulders of the young woman. This was the ghost of a child – the ghost of an aborted fetus. When the diviner told his client what he had seen, the woman admitted she had had an abortion, tears running down her cheeks. The woman that night left the divination market with a solution for countering the bad karma that her past abortion had allegedly generated. My diviner friend and I, on the other side, were left there with the sensation that the world of the fancy skyscrapers was in fact not too different from our own. What the ghost of that child had revealed was that even those people who had made it to the highest floors of the metropolitan skyline had scars on their backs that they were unable to heal; that the dream they embodied was little more than a bluff.



Diviners in the Bangkok night (author's photo)

The questions that open this article echo the concerns that motivate this special issue of *Voices from Around the World* in wondering whether ghosts may still find a place in contemporary societies. The presupposition of this line of enquiry seems to be that ghosts are 'non-modern', and that, as such, they must necessarily find themselves in contradiction with 'modernity'. This appears to be in line with Weber's prediction that 'beliefs' would have disappeared from societies with the achievement of modernity – a prediction that, as social scientists have argued, has hardly come true. Modernity has been achieved in Thailand, and discourses of modernity – the very discourses that

condemn diviners as a thing of the past – have been adopted by Thai society at large. Yet ghosts keep on reappearing in the places where one would least expect to find them.

I would like to suggest that ghosts may still find a place within the conspicuous modernity of downtown Bangkok precisely in order to challenge its discourses. The most powerful thing that diviners and 'child ghosts' do by simply *appearing* in the Bangkok night is indeed signalling that they exist. This entails suggesting that modernity has failed to arrive – or, even worse, that its arrival has not brought what it had promised. And, as their spectral presence shatters the myth of modernity, ghosts inevitably also challenge the very discourse that condemns them as a thing of the past. In a nation that, in spite of much apparent development and of the promises of 'happiness' made by its military leaders, is continuously plagued by social, political, and economic problems, the silent and powerful reminder of their presence may therefore be playing a more crucial role now than ever.

## References

- Schnepel, B. 2006. Strangers in the Night: The making and unmaking of differences from the perspective of an anthropology of the night. In: R. Rottenburg, B. Schnepel and S. Shimada (eds.) *The Making and Unmaking of Differences*. Bielefeld: Transaction Publishers. 123-144.