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## TWENTY THAILAND SUPERSTITIONS

Hundreds of special customs and practices, often labeled superstitions by foreigners, are prevalent in Thailand. Many of them originated in India and have traveled throughout Southeast Asia with the tide of Buddhism and Hinduism. Many of the Thai beliefs listed in this paper are found also in Burma, Indonesia and other countries of the Far East.

Thais would reject the term superstition, as applied to their beliefs, because the word connotes an invalid or irrational belief. Their customs have lasted many centuries and are held by almost all Thais. Superstitious practices usually are considered to be manifestations of fear of the unknown, but not all are based on fear. The Thailand customs pertain to the workings of both good and evil spirits in everyday life.

This paper lists 20 of the most prevalent superstitions in Thailand, in both rural and urban areas, and their rationales. While the influence of Western ways has to some slight extent modified some of these practices, they are for the most part still in vogue even among Thais who have had some modern education.

Most superstitions in some way deal with spirits, good or evil. This partial list of Thai beliefs is divided into four sections: (1) superstitions related to general symbolism, (2) superstitions concerning animals, (3) superstitions pertaining to people and (4) superstitions about spirits in general.

The selection was made by a former missionary who lived in Thailand more than 20 years and has written a number of books on the country.

1. General Symbolisms

a. Mystic ceremonies. It is a common belief that the observance of mystic rites upon initiation into any organization makes one impervious to knife or gun wounds. Tattooing is quite often a part of the ceremony.

b. Wearing of symbols. Akin to the mystic ceremonies is the wearing of symbols on clothing, often woven into the cloth. One of the most common symbols is the unalom, a flame-like symbol more often found in India. These symbols provide the same immunity to knives and gun wounds as do mystic ceremonies.

2. Animals

a. Tiger. The tiger is considered to have certain characteristics of strength and wisdom that most Thais consider desirable. Therefore, some part of the tiger, usually its whiskers, is woven into Thai ornaments, often intertwined in a bracelet.

b. Rhinoceros. The horn of a rhinoceros is believed to have a very high medicinal value. So strongly is this believed that the animal, once very prevalent in Thailand, is now virtually extinct.

3. People

a. The head. Under no conditions may a person be touched on the head, because the Thais believe a person's spirit lives in a small hole in the top of the head and touching it is a mark of disrespect which permanently injures the spirit.

b. Sole of the foot. A person must not wiggle his toes at another person or point the sole of his foot at him, because the foot is the lowest part of the body and the action has the implication of placing one's sole higher than the spirit of the other person.

c. Henpecking. If a wife desires to acquire complete control over her husband, she may hang her garments over his bed, whether he is in it at the time or not. The knowledge that his wife had performed the rite is supposed to unnerve him completely, making him effeminate and causing him to bend completely to her will.

d. Love potions. If a woman wishes to cause a man to fall in love with her, she prepares him a meal, mixing part of her menstrual blood into the food. When a man eats this food, it is supposed to bind the two together eternally.

e. Astrology. Nothing of any importance is ever undertaken without consulting an astrologer.

f. Composition of the body. It is believed throughout Thailand that the body is composed of four elements: earth, air, water and fire. Any illness is a change in the balance of these elements. Therefore, if one asks a Thai how he feels, the answer may be "there is too much fire in me." Also related to this belief is the custom of letting a woman bake in the sun for hours or days after childbirth to dry up excess water in the body and restore proper balance.

g. Twins. Twins are considered very unlucky. For many years human twins were killed upon birth to avoid bring evil upon the entire household. The practice is observed sometimes even today.

h. Idiocy. An idiot or a person in any way mentally unbalanced is believed to be inhabited by an alien spirit. If one drives this spirit from the individual, the original spirit will return and the person will again become normal.

i. Rousing. It is absolutely forbidden to wake anyone suddenly, as this upsets a person's spirit. This idea can be extended to prohibit sudden changes of any type.

j. Foreigners. It is believed that farangs, or Westerners, are not affected by any superstitions pertaining to the Thailand people.

#### 4. Spirits in General

a. Steps. The number of steps leading to a Thai house is always an odd number, because evil spirits always take steps by twos and if a single step is left at the end, the spirit will fall to the ground and will not be able to enter the house.

b. Friendly and evil spirits. The spirit of a person who dies in peace from natural causes continues in the after-life as a friendly spirit. Spirits of those dying violently or from an infectious disease live on as evil spirits.

c. Location of spirits. After death, spirits continue to hover in the general area of the death.

d. Creation of evil spirits. The best method, in Thai thinking, of protecting any valuable possession is to create an evil spirit near by to guard it. To accomplish this in former days, a person was told to guard this possession and then killed. Because the person met a violent death his spirit became evil and continued to reside in that vicinity. This method was very common until about 1850. It is now frowned upon generally but still sometimes practiced. Instead of killing a person, now someone dying from an infectious disease is brought to the spot to die and leave an evil spirit behind.

e. Spirit Shrines. To appease the spirit, almost every Thai house maintains a spirit shrine. The shrines are not only to appease the spirits of the dead but are also used to prepare the spirits of the living for life in the after-world. For this reason, many shrines contain objects symbolizing concubines for the master of the household, so he may have a better life in the hereafter.

f. Tree spirits. Thais believe that special beneficial qualities are inherent in particularly large trees. If there is an outstandingly large tree in a village, twice a year the villagers gird the tree with a cloth band in the traditional saffron yellow of Buddhism and hold special ceremonies to honor the tree spirit and insure his continued protection.