VILLAGE MONS OF BANGKOK

by

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The Mons, also known as Raaman or Taleeŋ, are to be found in scattered communities in Thailand in and around the central valley. The areas of Paklat (Prapadeng) and Pakkrek are well-known for their colourful *Sǒngkraan* festivals, when beauty queens release fish into the river, but it is less well known that Mon-speaking enclaves survive in Kanchanaburi, Lopburi, Uthaithani, and much nearer the capital in Pathumthani, Nontaburi and even in Bangkok (province). The Mons are a respected minority with an ancient past. They are the remnant of the earliest-known civilisation in Southeast Asia, and were exposed to Brahminism and Theravada Buddhism more than a thousand years before the arrival of the Thais and the Burmese in the area. Historically the Mons suffered a fate similar to that of the Chams. With the conquest of Pegu by Alaungpaya in 1757 the Mons were left, in the words of "the father of Mon Studies, Halliday"[1]

"a people without a country"[2]

and there were successive immigrations of Mons from Burma into Siam in the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. No exact figures are available for the number of Mons in Thailand. La Loubère[3] gives the impression that they were present in considerable numbers, and Pallegoix, quoted by Bowring,[4] gave the figure of 50,000 Mons out of a total population of 6 million persons. Seiden-

1) H.L. Shorto, *A Dictionary of Spoken Mon* (Oxford University Press, London) 1962, p. xiv.

2) R. Halliday, "The Immigration of the Mons into Siam" in *JSS* X/3, July 1913.

3) La Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (Horne, Saunders, and Bennet, London) 1693 p. 10.

4) Sir John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (Parker, London) 1856, p. 81.

faden[5] more recently estimated there were 100,000 Mons in the country. Several Mons when questioned by this author gave, without any evidence, an airy figure of 'about one million' which is certainly exaggerated.

Because the Mons, since Dvaravati times, have tended to assimilate with newer ethnic groups on the scene, any precise figure of their numbers would be difficult to obtain. There is moreover a distinction to be made between Mon speakers and those who are ethnically of Mon descent, the latter group, obviously, being much more numerous. The younger generation is educated in Thai and illiterate in Mon, but it is not true that none of the Mons in Thailand "can ... read their old script"[6]: a number of old people, mostly men educated in Mon temples, can still read the language, and there are several temples, particularly in Prapadeng, where Mon manuscripts are read and the sermons preached in Mon. Seidenfaden states, however,

> "It seems therefore sure that one day the
> Mon will be completely absorbed by the Thai"[7]

and this view is entirely reasonable.

As anthropologists are well aware, languages and, even more so, customs show remarkable tenacity in the face of all the forces of assimilation. The onset of incipient industrialisation appears to hasten these forces. It is therefore surprising to find, in villages so near to Bangkok as to be part of Bangkok province (the smallest in size in the country), that Mon customs and language still survive. What follows is a brief note on customs noted in a Mon community on a canal appropriately called Klong Mon, leading off Klong Lamplatiew near Laadgrabang, and only 1 kilometre from the railway line or some 40 minutes from Makkasan Station.[8] In this community, Mon is still spoken by all the adults among

5) Erik Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples* (Siam Society, Bangkok) 1958, pp. 116-7.

6) Seidenfaden, op. cit.

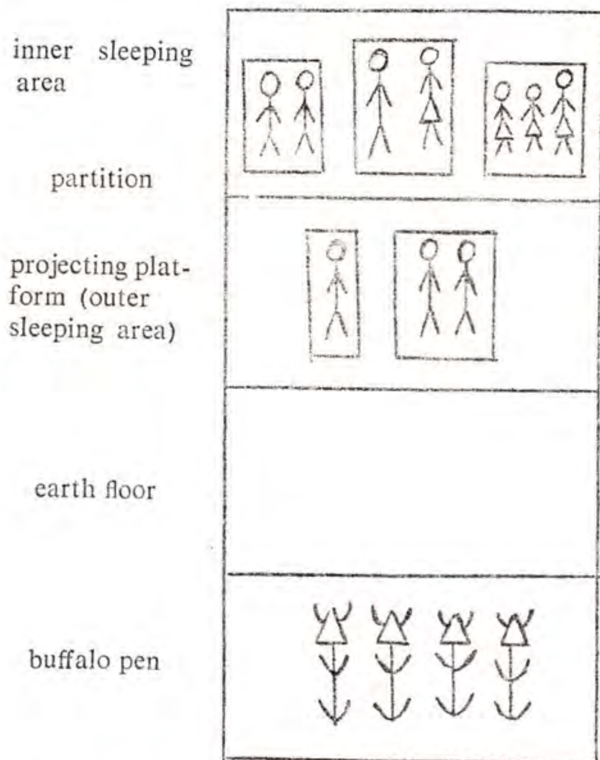
7) Seidenfaden, op. cit.

8) I am much indebted to the villagers of Klong Mon for their patience in dealing with my questioning, and particularly grateful to my chief informant in this study, Mr. Boonsong Saraphan, of 40 Moo 6, Klong Mon, Laadgrabang.

themselves, who however can also speak Thai. The children are addressed in Mon and usually reply in Mon. In some families they use Thai acquired in the schools to express more complex ideas when conversing with their elders. The children nearly always speak Thai to each other.[9]

The most immediately striking aspect of the Mon community is that the external and internal appearances of the houses are completely different from standard rural Thai houses. The Mon dwellings are not raised off the ground in the living and kitchen area, where the floor is of beaten earth : if there are many daughters in the house, the floor is smooth, but if sons are more numerous the floor does not get the attention it would otherwise receive. Some southern (Thai/Malay) houses are like this; so are many fisherman's huts beside the shores of the gulf and the huts of some Chinese vegetable growers near the capital. The cattle, always buffaloes, are brought in at night and tethered to a horizontal bar in one part of the living area. Projecting into the living area is a raised wooden platform which extends back into the inner part of the house where the family sleep. The outer area underneath the platform, usually only a metre off the ground, is used for storing. The walls are of matting, atap or corrugated iron and the roof also of atap or corrugated iron. The atap is bought and not made in the village. The floor in the inner sleeping area is sometimes raised a few inches above that of the part extending into the living area. The sleeping arrangement is usually that the wife and husband (and, if they are living in the same house, the wife's or husband's parents), the younger male children and all the daughters sleep in the inner area, though under separate mosquito nets from those of the parents. The male children of the age of about fifteen or above sleep on the floor area projecting into the living room. In many houses a symmetry of sleeping positions was noted.

9) No analysis of the linguistic situation will be attempted here, for it would be beyond the scope of this note and the author's competence. Readers are referred to the works of Shorto and Halliday, *inter alia*. Mon is, of course, completely different from Thai, being atonal and belonging to the Mon-Khmer linguistic group. Mon script is again completely different from Thai script, and was adopted by the Burmese after the conquest of Thaton in 1057 by Anawrata.



Often, but not always, the inner sleeping area is built over water and boats are kept beneath; this apparently is to act as a deterrent to thieves intending to steal boats at night. In the inner sleeping area is usually located the main house post, which is not apparently accorded any special symbolic or ritualistic standing once the house is built.

Halliday, in his standard book on the Mons,[10] makes no mention of the beaten earth floor of the living area, which makes the houses quite distinct from their Siamese counterparts. Seidenfaden[11] states "the Mons build their houses like the Thai, only that their houses are always orientated east-west"; Halliday[12] more cautiously says "It would seem that Talaing houses ought to be so built, but the rule is by no means generally carried out either in Siam or Burma." Certainly in the village observed, there was no general pattern in the orientation of the houses and when asked the Mons replied it did not matter, but depended on the

10) R. Halliday, *The Talaings* (Government Press, Rangoon) 1917, pp. 22-23. This is a detailed, perceptive and still largely valid account of the Mons, primarily based on a study of communities in Burma but also referring extensively to Mon practices in Siam.

11) op. cit p. 117.

12) op. cit p. 27.

Fig. 1. A Mon house by the canal, Klong Mon, built on the earth

Fig. 2. An elderly Mon couple seated on a sleeping mat

Fig. 3. The section set aside for buffaloes in a house, in which the earthern floor can be clearly distinguished

Fig. 4. A buffalo tied up for the night in the house

land available. In all houses seen, people slept with the heads to the south or east. The Mons state that one can also sleep with the head towards the north, but never, as with the Thais, to the west, the direction of the departed.

The houses are remarkably devoid of furniture or decoration. There might be a wooden bench and a table and chairs, often of the folding metal variety, for eating. The only decorative items, which however are basically functional, are the woven rush (T: kòg, M : roh) sleeping mats, with patterns picked out in strips dyed in different colours. These are quite different from Thai mats (T : sỳa, M : həgao); they are not sold but each household makes them for its own use. Halliday[13] implies that only the women make these, but in the village observed sometimes men also make these gay traditional sleeping mats. Rice is stored inside the house, along with all machines for husking and winnowing the rice.

The area surrounding the house is no different from a standard Thai house. The dogs and chickens stay outside at night, though when eating in the house, chickens sometimes run in and out of the living area, as do the dogs. A profusion of trees and shrubs surrounds the house. A particular preference was expressed for jasmine, but there was no visible evidence of this in the predominance of banana trees that were actually growing there. There is also a spirit house (T : sǎanphrǎ́phuum M : alá? thii), mention of which will be made later. No pigs are kept, though there is no interdiction against eating pork. This seemed somewhat inconsistent and on inquiry it was only possible to ascertain that 'the Raaman (Mon) spirits would not like it', and 'there would be no progress if one raised pigs'. A rationalizing explanation was given by a younger Mon who pointed out that Muslims lived in the next hamlet and perhaps it was out of deference to their presence that pigs were not kept. The Mon/Muslim contiguity dates from as long ago as anyone can remember; the area was probably settled by both in the second half of the nineteenth century. Each house has at least one large boat for transporting rice and usually two or three smaller boats for everyday transport requirements. There is no road, no piped water, no electricity and no telephone, of course, in the village.

13) op. cit p. 51.

Physically the Mons appear different from Thais. Women no longer in their early prime wear their hair in a bun at the back of the head, and frequently cover their heads, both in and outside the house, with a strip of cloth or towelling in the form of a turban. They also have, noticeably before marriage, a preference for very bright and often clashing colours in their dress; they have a reputation for beauty which their gay costume enhances. The men commonly wear trousers, or checkered sarongs made of silk for special occasions. Like the Thais, they sometimes wear Buddha images around their necks, particularly if going on long journeys. The turbans of the women, the men's sarongs and the tendency to be somewhat darker skinned than the Thais make it difficult to distinguish the Mons from their Muslim neighbours, and the Mons themselves say they cannot always outwardly tell a Muslim from a Mon.

They have no dietary restrictions and their food is completely similar to Thai food though they also eat field mice and snakes as do northeasterners. They rarely drink tea or coffee in their houses, mostly because they seem to consider it an unnecessary luxury. Their festivals are marked not only by meals at which all are welcome, but sometimes by music played on the Siamese fiddle, xylophone and Chinese harp: they particularly enjoy singing alternating refrains (M: khajɛɛmɔɔn), a kind of Mon *lamtàd*. The well-known game of *sabâa* is occasionally played in the village, particularly at *Sŏngkraan* (M: atáʔ) after the traditional releasing of fish into the canal by the village girls dressed in their best and brightest clothes.

Sabâa (M: hanɛ̀ɛʔ) is a traditional Mon courtship game, played between two groups of about 15 young men and 15 young women, all unmarried, who sit facing each other on two long benches some 10 metres apart. The earth floor between them is specially smoothed by pounding it, adding water to the earth to make it malleable, and a temporary roof structure is erected over the floor. The *sabâa* themselves are circular wooden discs (M: konʔhanɛ̀ɛʔ) which are either rolled, or flipped, or kicked 'depending on the set' from one side to the other across the smooth floor; the *sabâa* of the men are bigger and heavier than the *sabâa* of the women. Leaders of the men and the women are appointed and they indicate who will play in what order in each game. The women are seated first on

Fig. 5. Sleeping mats outside the midwife's house

Fig. 6. A girl with a child outside a house

Fig. 7. The village midwife with a nephew outside their house built on the ground; themidwife is wearing a piece of cloth wrapped round her hair like most elderly Mon women

Fig. 8. *Sabâa* : the turn of the boys to request the girls for the return of their *sabâa* : the girl bending over is placing her smaller *sabăa* in an upright position again after the boy knocked it over with his

Fig. 9. One set of the *sabăa* when the disc is kicked with the left foot. The floor is of pounded, dampened and smoothed earth

the bench and the men aim their *sabâa* at the *sabâa* of the person they have selected as a partner and which is placed upright on the ground. They then go up to their partner, whether they have hit her *sabâa* or not, sit on the ground, and engage in repartee. They will do this two or three times in each set, as arranged by the leader. Then there is a *ramwoŋ* interlude, the men take up positions on the bench, set their *sabâa* upright and the women aim their *sabâa*, go up to their partner, sit in front of him on the ground, and likewise engage in repartee. When this set is over, after another *ramwoŋ* interlude, the next set, decided on by the leaders, is played–the method of throwing might be changed so that for example the *sabâa* is balanced on the foot and thrown from the foot. The art comes less in standard bowling techniques than in the story-telling and jokes that go with the game. The women are relatively reticent, but the men after rolling their *sabâa* engage in lengthy repartee. It takes from 9. p.m. to 6 a.m. to go through the whole game. The game is always played at *Sǒngkraan* in April, for three consecutive nights, and might be played on two other occasions, the trudmɔɔn and soŋnáamphra, which are primarily religious occasions.

The women have to give money before the game to the owner of the place (T : câwkhɔ̌ɔŋbɔ̀n, M : alȁ ʔhɔ́j ʔ) where the *sabâa* is played. The women also have to help prepare the earth. The men do not have to give any money or help in the preparation of the place, and the game cannot take place if the men do not turn up. The women have to sit and wait for the men, who must always come from another village. No one can play unless properly dressed; the women in *phâasîn*, blouse and *sabai*, the men in sarongs and shirts. In contrast to the expenditure here, the women receive money from the men at ordination ceremonies (see below). This is an interesting parallel, as though the women needed to pay for the pleasure of finding a husband, but needed to be paid for the pain of losing, albeit temporarily, members of the male community.

Traditional anthropological labels–matriarchal, patrilocal or whatever–do not take into account the characteristic fluidity of family groups in the region, current economic pressures, and the relative ease with which new homes can be erected. Mon men tend to marry (T : tèŋŋaan,

M : həmáw) around the age of 22 after completing military service obligations, but their brides are usually younger. The Mon young man usually chooses one of his own race; intermarriage with Thais is quite common, but very rare with the nearby Muslims. Marriage has only fairly recently been formalised and couples merely cohabited before. They marry at the house of the bride but the couple may reside subsequently either in the house of the groom or the bride, according to the agreement reached by the go-between who arranges the marriage (T : thâwkèɛ, M : ʔakənwúut). There is no water pouring ceremony : the couple pray and seek their parents' forgiveness and the elders give their blessing. A feast is held to celebrate the occasion and priests attend this.

Families tend to be numerous and ten children not exceptional. Probably because of the proximity of the capital, relatively few young people would appear to stay in the village, which tends to consist largely of the very old or the very young. This falsifies the residence arrangements of the family but it would seem that by the time a married couple is middle-aged, if not before, it has its own home, and the elders continue to live in their own homes. Generalisations of this kind are notoriously error-prone, however; in one family all the children lived in the capital and the old couple ceased to farm, but lived off money sent by their children. They looked after a grandchild whose presence for some reason was inconvenient in the city.

Family relationships, outwardly at least, are uncomplicated. Paternal sanction is needed for any decision of importance. There is the usual respect for elder siblings on the part of the younger, balanced by the greater responsibility the former have to assume in contributing to the family economy. Minor wives are not kept or not admitted to, and the economic situation of the villagers probably enforces monogamy. Kin are scattered in other Mon communities in the greater metropolitan area though of course most are to be found in the same village. Incidentally, because of the closed nature of this small community, even Mon private actions become public knowledge which may account for the apparently high standards of morality, particularly in their few commercial dealings.

Traditionally all the inhabitants of the village are rice farmers, but the proximity of Bangkok increasingly allows farmers to seek part-time jobs as carpenters or plasterers in the capital in the dry season if there is not sufficient to keep them occupied in repairing their boats at home, and their children to find permanent employment, especially if they have gone to the secondary school at Hua Takay. The one point on which the gentle and unassertive Mons show feelings of pride in themselves is in their ability as rice farmers; in this they feel definitely superior. Such superiority if real would doubtless lie in skill and application rather than in techniques, for the methods used, with ploughing by buffaloes and irrigation from natural flooding, are the same as those employed in Thai villages in the central plain. The Mons observed buy all their wants, including cloth, in the local market with the profit from their rice-farming. Only chickens, eggs, fish and readily available vegetables like water spinach are acquired in the village.

Rice is usually planted (T : damnaa, M : tʌmméəʔ) in June from small shoots or seedlings in partially flooded land. Some 15-20 people plant at the same time in a field. Muslim day labourers from the nearby village are hired to assist in this work. They are available because they plant their own fields, if they have any, by scattering the seed on dry earth (T : wàanhɛ̂ɛŋ, M : krasɔ́ʔ) and one person can easily do this alone; Muslims in the locality appear not to have much land. Workers are paid 25 baht for transplanting one rai (1600 square metres). If the rains have not come in time, the fields are flooded by using a petrol driven water pump. Nearly all houses have these, usually adapting their boat engines for the pump. The harvest is gathered (T : kìawkhâaw, M : rosɔ́ʔ) in December and January. Muslim labour is also hired for harvesting, the rate being 70 baht for one rai, harvesting being harder work than planting. Among the Mons, labour is not hired but the able-bodied help each other harvest on a village-sharing basis, usually about twenty men and young women working from 8 to 4 or 5, with a break for lunch, for two months in the open fields. There are no special working groups.

The current (1971) price for rice is very low, being 700 baht a *kwian*. A fairly average sized holding would be 25 rai. One rai yields 30 *taŋ* (100 *taŋ*= 1 *kwian*), using no fertilizers. If no labour is hired and

no seedlings bought, this gives a return of 5,250 baht per year. One typical family, 9 in size, estimated its monthly expenses at about 1,000 baht, the difference being made up by the income of 3 persons working in Bangkok. This however causes much expenditure on petrol to take members of the family to the nearest road and railhead each day. Clothing, school fees and books for the 4 children of school age represent a considerable expense.

A Chinese merchant comes to the houses to collect the rice; he pays cash, but farmers sometimes have to wait 7 to 10 days for the money after the rice has been collected. Loans are available from the Chinese middle-men during the year in times of stress, at 50% interest, the guarantee being the future rice crop. Cooperatives can obtain money from a local bank at 10% interest; 150 farmers in the area can obtain through the cooperative 3,000-5,000 baht each, depending on their land holdings.

No attempt is made at crop diversification, and it is to be doubted if the flat heavy clay soil which is inundated for six months and parched the rest of the year could readily produce anything except rice. A latent cottage industry exists in the making of attractive sleeping mats, but only sufficient for domestic use are made at present and none are normally for sale. The Mons' chief asset after their rice would appear to be their labour which finds employment in the capital.

The major part of community activity centres on the temple. The Mons consider themselves more devout Buddhists than the Thais. Religious ceremonies take place in the temple and monks only rarely visit houses in connection with religious or social duties. From a material point of view, the life of Mon monks would appear to be easier, though on the other hand they seem to conform more closely to formal religious prescriptions.[14] They may have no contact with money and may not spend their time in non-religious activities, such as carpentry or other handicrafts. The temple boys row the boats when the priests go begging for food early in the morning; usually there are some six boys and only one priest in a boat. As elsewhere in Thailand when monks go begging

14) The reformed Thamajutnikaaj sect owes its existence partly to King Rama IV's having met a Mon monk.

for food by boat, people place only rice in the priests's bowl, and curries, soups and fruit are offered to the priests and given to the temple boys who place them in a *pintoo*, with a different tray for each; Mon priests do not therefore have their food placed indiscriminately by merit-makers in the begging bowl as is the lot of Thai priests whose food soliciting is landborne.

The head monk of the village, a fluent Mon reader and speaker, said that every holy day the sermon was preached in both Mon and Thai—Thai in the morning and Mon in the afternoon. He estimated a morning attendance of 30-50, mostly women, and very few for the one p.m. sermon. This he put down to the time rather than the language (it was incidentally pointed out that a few years back when one of the local radio stations ran a programme in Mon for an hour in the evening, every single house along the canal tuned in to listen). No attempt is made to convert the nearby communities of Muslims or Chinese Mahayanists, in conformity with the non-proselytizing nature of Buddhism.

The abbot confirmed that Mon monks go relatively little to visit houses of parishioners. Their presence is normal at ceremonies of topknot cutting, marriage, death, and the completion of a new house. He estimated the presence of some 80 families in the nearby Klong Mon and another 150 further up the main canal dependent on the temple, some 80% in all being Mon. There are normally 5 monks in the temple, with 20-30 during the Buddhist Lent.

The temple, Wat Sudthaapòt, has occupied its present site on Klong Lamplatiew since 1908; previously it was one kilometre down Klong Mon, a space now marked by an empty plot of land. When the original temple was built was not known. The only visible sign that the temple is Mon rather than Thai is in the neon sign in Mon (made 'at great expense' according to the abbot) to replace the wooden name-plate of the temple. This sign, lit at night by the temple's generator, decorates the tower holding the water tanks. The monks' dwelling houses are raised off the ground on posts, as in a Thai temple, and are therefore unlike Mon houses. In the temple compound can be seen the long narrow boats used by the monks for collecting alms and food in the early morning.

Also in the temple compound is a plaster and brick construction, reputed to be 'about 20 years old' but probably older if the style of the guardian sailors' dress is an indication of date, erected by the son of a nephew of two persons referred to as Nai Lua and Nang Liang who, in the reign of Rama III, reputedly went to Ceylon and brought religious texts and books back to Siam. The memorial is curious rather than beautiful, and disfigured by a decaying corrugated iron canopy.

It would appear that young Mon men conform closely to the ideal that all males before marriage should enter the priesthood, and the occasion is, as in Thai villages, one of great rejoicing and ceremony. At one ceremony witnessed almost the entire village turned up to eat lunch. Young men made monetary offerings on the occasion to the girls assembled, in the following fashion. Names of the men were recorded in a register, and at the appropriate moment, one was called to present an envelope containing one's cash contribution to a beautifully attired young lady, each girl taking turns to receive the gift, to be kept for her own use (as mentioned above, the women however have to pay for the pleasure of the courtship game *sabâa*). The act of going up to offer the gift was interspersed with songs accompanied by drums. Then the future priest was borne aloft, richly attired in the most exotic costume imaginable and protected by ceremonial umbrellas, and carried in procession to the temple. There, he changed into a loin-cloth, his head was shaved in the *sǎalaa* while juggling acts were performed by the village youths. Subsequently he donned white for the usual ordination ceremony.

All the usual Buddhist festivals are observed, but the most important is that marking the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, T: *Khâw Phansǎa*. Special cakes are made and taken and offered to the temple; the young people dress in their best and their brightest colours.

As among Thais, Buddhism, Brahminism and animism co-exist, although the Mons do appear to place considerably more emphasis on non-Buddhist supernatural forces. From birth on, the Mon child is reared in a world of ghosts and taboos which limit his freedom and require special rites. The midwife occupies a special place in this world, as one would expect, and has functions later on in the child's life.

Fig. 10. The recently erected neon sign in Mon indicating the name of the temple

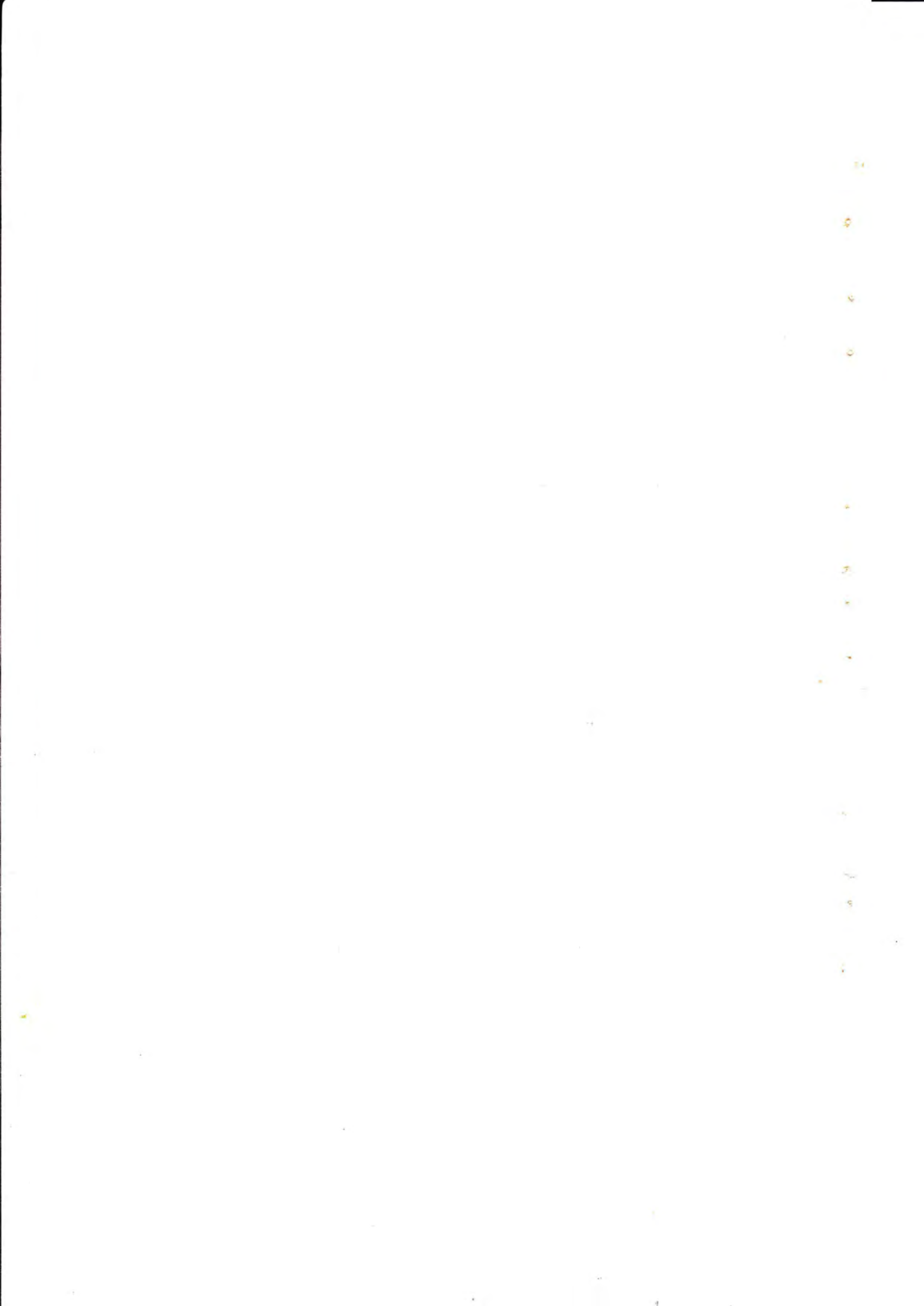
Fig. 11. A memorial in the temple grounds to Nai Lua and Nang Liang who crossed the sea to Ceylon to bring back religious texts

Fig. 12. Ordination : village girls assembled at a party at the house of an ordinand before going in procession to the temple

Fig. 13. Ordination : part of the procession to the temple

Fig. 14. Ordination: two ordinands on arrival at the temple. They immediately after this put on ordinary loin cloths, had their heads shaved in the *sǎalaa*, and then donned white for the induction ceremony

Fig. 15. Spirit houses for both house and ancestor ghosts



The village midwife (T : mɔ̆ɔtamjɛɛ, M : ʔimmiʔ), an old woman, said, when interviewed, that nothing had ever gone wrong with all her deliveries so she did not know what ceremonies had to be observed in the case of still birth. Her services are less in demand now than in the past, and for one year she had not assisted at any births until the day before being interviewed for the second time. Expectant mothers now tend to go to the local health centre in the nearby township. Traditional births take place in the house. The midwife first performs a ***wâaj khruu*** (M : yay koəcàa) ceremony. Joss-sticks and candles are placed on a tray and prayers offered to one's teacher, to the Buddha, and the house ghosts who have the form of winds. She then feels the body of the mother to discover the position of the child and touches the body to ensure a good birth. To deliver the child, the woman lies on the floor with knees raised. When the child appears, the midwife puts her finger in the child's mouth and cleans it out to ensure unobstructed breathing.

The umbilical cord is cut by placing a small clod of earth underneath it and severing it with a strip of bamboo. The baby is washed and tumeric put on the naval and all over the child as an antiseptic. The child is then wrapped in white cloth with only the face exposed. It is put on a cushion in a cradle. The mother is then made to drink vinegar, and tamarind juice with much salt. No herbs are used for accelerating healing; the mother is washed in warm water. Bricks are then heated, washed, and wrapped in cloth and placed under the mother's legs and back. A locally-bought stomach-warmer (T : jaachúdjuufaj, M : ujbaa-mót) is put on the stomach. The afterbirth (T : ròg, M : sɔ́jʔ) is taken and placed on a small square of sleeping mat; salt, cooked rice and a needle (symbolizing preservation, plenty and intelligence) are placed on it and wrapped up with it; a small hole in the compound is dug and it is placed in it. Rice, betel nut and betel vine are put in the hole and prayers are offered to one's teacher, the angels and mɛ̂ɛ thɔɔranii (the fructifying goddess of the earth) : the hole is filled with earth and the surface made smooth. The mother is washed for three evenings and the bricks are replaced when cold. The mother stays by a hot fire (T : yuufaj, M : mɔŋəmót) 'to dry out the blood' for 7-9 days and nights, the wood for the fire being laid in by the father before the birth. Usually

logs of a small tree g. *Combretum* (T : máaj sakɛɛ, M : chuuəʔkɛɛ) are cut. The fire is kept in a large earthenware jar in the middle of the room where the mother lies. Anyone in the family may place wood on the fire during the time it is burning. The midwife is paid 50-100 baht for her services.

The midwife's functions do not stop with childbirth. In the Brahministic tradition, which used to be widespread among the Thais but now has largely disappeared, most children still wear the topknot (T : cùg, M : kàaw coo), traditionally until the age of eleven, when the long lock of hair is cut by the midwife, or her replacement if the original midwife who assisted at the birth died in the meantime, and it is thrown into the canal to float away in the belief that 'the brain will be clear' thereafter. This is admitted by the Mons themselves to be a ceremony of Brahmin origin. The occasion is one when friends and priests are invited to eat at the house to mark the event with due ceremony. Nowadays the cutting of the topknot may be performed earlier, at the age of seven before the children go to the village school or even much before, to coincide with another ceremony like dedicating a new house, and thereby effecting an economy, the cost of a single feast being made to serve for both ceremonies.

Children are brought up to respect the supernatural and are allowed no dolls or masks, for 'the spirits would make the children mad' and 'make them hot' (give them a fever). Sculpture of any form is nominally forbidden inside the house, though in one house a cheap green glass Buddha on a raised shelf, in the manner of Thai houses, was observed. However, calendars and photographs are not subject to this interdiction, possibly because they became available in more recent times.

The pantheon of Mon ghosts is comparatively esoteric and embellished with distinctive prohibitions. The Mon would appear to have established three categories of universal ghosts. There are, first, the malevolent ghosts which cause accidents and sickness, and which come from departed humans; these are known as M : pɛt cia (T : phǐi siŋ). Then there are the non-human house ghosts, M : aloh hòjʔ (T : phǐi bàan), which act as human consciences; they have no material form, and reward those who behave well and punish those who do not. Finally, there are benevolent ancestor ghosts, M : paa nòh, thawh nòh

(T: câw phɔ̂ɔ, câw mɛ̂ɛ), who have a dwelling place outside similar to the spirit house where the house ghosts are symbolically located (though in fact the house ghosts are normally considered to be found inside the house), but the symbolic shrine to the ancestor ghosts is usually a little larger. Apparently some Mons, perhaps feeling they have sufficient ghosts to contend with already, do not pay homage to these ancestors; but on the whole most people make offerings to them; a pig's head, if a pig is eaten, is always reserved for the ancestors, and the milk of a young coconut is also offered to them. There are, of course, a great number of ancestor ghosts and they have many names; it is usually found convenient to invite them all at the same time and make offerings to them collectively.

TABLE 1

Mon ghosts without taboos or animal associations

Nature	Bad	Variable	Good
Name M Name T	pɛt cịəʔ phii siŋ ผีสิง	aloh hɔ́jʔ phĭi bâan ผีบ้าน	paa nȯh, thawh nȯh câw phɔ̂ɔ, câw mɛ̂ɛ เจ้าพ่อ, เจ้าแม่
Origin	dead persons	inanimate:in the house	ancestors
Location	jungle, cemetery	house	in the house compound
Shrine	none	spirit house	ancestor spirit house
Capable of causing	sickness	good and bad events according to human actions	good events, but in case of bad behaviour they can be less than benevolent
Offerings	fruit, vegetables, according to the day	incense, food, turtle heads and feet, and other hereditary animal-ghost titbits	incense, pig's head, fresh coconut

often the two categories are served in the same way and in the same place

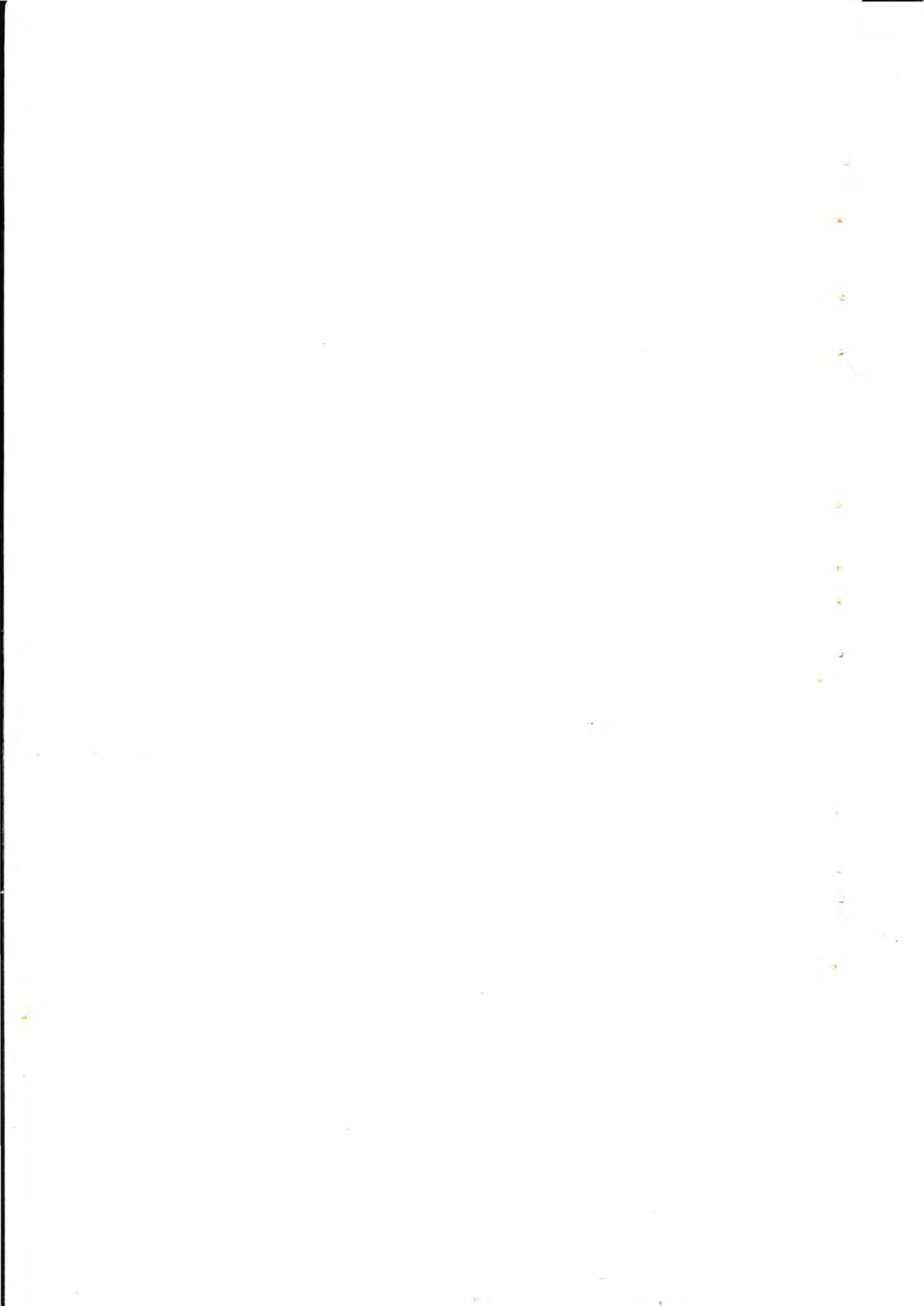
Spirit houses are well tended. There may occasionally be spots inside the house considered sacred and the place of residence of the house ghosts which are formless "winds" (T : lom, M : shåa). A house post with a dark stain upon it would thus become an object of respect if not worship. Shrines to the unusual are also erected; in one house compound is a shrine for a stone reputedly found floating on the water and thus a divine manifestation out of the order of nature; although the stone was found three generations ago, it bears the marks of recently-placed gold leaf and joss sticks are nearby.

To insure for the protection of the spirits and to atone for possibly disturbing them offerings are made to the spirits before the harvest is begun; fruit, rice and paper flags are laid out for them; much the same is done in many Thai villages and by coastal fishermen on holy days before launching their boats for the night's catch.

Sickness requires the assistance of the village ghost doctor before any recourse to modern medicines. The village ghost doctor (T : mɔ̌ɔ-phǐi, M : mɔ̀ɔ rɔɔŋəlóh), who in fact in this village is the husband of the midwife, is called to assist in the case of undiagnosed sicknesses (that is, all those not obviously caused by an external agent, such as a cut from a boat propeller). Wearing a shirt and a sarong, or possibly trousers, he goes to the house of the sick person and sits down on the floor on the right side of the patient. He waves a five-branched stem of star gooseberry, a tree apparently disliked by ghosts (T : majom, M : nam cuəlãin) up and down over the victim and incants for about half an hour in dog Pali, the entire meaning of which is lost on him but the purport is not. According to the day (see table 2), he determines the direction the sickness comes from, its cause and symptoms; he makes clay images and arranges food and other offerings at the feet of the patient on a specially made leaf tray, which is then floated on the canal in the direction of the sickness with a specific incantation in dog Pali. All this takes place in the evening or the night, because ghosts are only on the scene in the hours of darkness, and the object is to exorcise the ghost not only from the victim's body, but also from the compound of

Fig. 16. A shrine for a sacred object, in this case a stone reputedly found floating on the water by the grandfather of the present houseowner

Fig. 17. The village ghost doctor, informally attired



the house where the victim is lying. If the patient does not shortly afterwards recover, then the illness is deemed not to be caused by ghosts, and the patient then goes to the health centre at the nearest road-head. The village ghost doctor is however usually consulted first.

The art of the ghost doctor was taught by a now deceased elder; he is the only one left in the village now, though in another nearby Mon community there are two or three other ghost doctors still practising. There used to be female mediums but there are none now, and their position was never important. They became mad when the ghosts entered their body. The village ghost doctor only deals in living people; the priests take over when someone dies. The ghost doctor is paid in kind for his services; this particular doctor is fond of drinking, and so he is given a bottle of 28° Bangyikaan alcohol, costing 6 Baht 50, as his professional fee.

(continued on next page)

TABLE 2

Schematic arrangement of the exorcism of illness caused by ghosts among the Mons

Day	Direction of sickness	Cause of fear	Symptoms	Make images of	Offerings	Type of float for food	Direction to send float	Incantation to use when sending float
Monday	East	Fourfooted animals	Inflamed liver and intestines, unwillingness to speak or eat rice and fish	Red cow, red goat	7 fruits, 7 vegetables, fish, bananas, sugar cane	Lotus leaf	East	Om yakakinee sawaha
Tuesday	Southwest	Tree trunks	Fever, eyes closed, high temperature, no appetite	Naga, dog	7 fruits, 7 vegetables, 7 flowers, fish, bananas, sugar cane	Lotus leaf	Southwest	Om rakkaka palayanti sawaha
Wednesday	North	A big ghost called Tamarata	Fever which comes from eating meat	Goat, duck	7 vegetables	Banana leaf	North	Om na ramachitta sawaha
Thursday	South	Tosakan	Dry tongue, unwillingness to open the eyes	Garuda, Yaksa and ghosts	7 vegetables, 7 fruits, 7 flowers	Bamboo wood	South	Om sakaroti sawaha

Friday	West	The angel Sunawana	No appetite, sleeplessness, high skin temperature	Goat, duck	7 fruits, 7 vegetables, fish, beef, bananas, sugar cane, honey, milk, dry boiled rice	Mango leaf	West	Om yumasawatee sawaha
Saturday	Southeast	Big ghosts	Fever, high body temperature, deafness, clouded eyes, headache, shivering	Tiger, goat, dog	7 vegetables, 7 fruits, fish, beef, bananas, sugar cane, honey, joss-sticks, candles	Banana leaf	Southeast	Namo puttarakanang itipi so pakawa yaksaa palayanti sawaha
Sunday	Northwest	The angel Amrata	Fever, eyes unable to focus, dry throat, no strength in feet and hands, headache, cannot sleep, cannot eat	The Lord of all lions, Indra, and a human	7 vegetables, 7 fruits, meat, fish, bananas, sugar cane, honey, milk	Banana leaf	Northwest	Om namo puttasa; om namo tammasasa; om namo sangkasasa sawaha

TABLE 3

Incantations of the village ghost doctor[15]

The incantations in dog Pali were inscribed in Thai in a manual compiled by the ghost doctor who could not read Mon.

Day		
Monday:	Incantation	อมยักคิณีสวาหะ
	Romanised	Om yakakinee sawaha
	Probable text in correct Pali	โอม ยกฺขินี สฺวาห
	Translation into Thai	โอม ยักษ์ผู้หญิงทั้งหลาย เพี้ยง
	Translation into English	O giantesses! Amen.
Tuesday:	Incantation	อมรักขาพลายันติสวาหะ
	Romanised	Om rakkaka palayanti sawaha
	Probable text in correct Pali	โอม ยกฺขา ปลายนฺติ สฺวาห
	Translation into Thai	โอม ยักษ์ผู้ชายทั้งหลายย่อมหนีไป เพี้ยง
	Translation into English	O begone, all giants! Amen.
Wednesday:	Incantation	อมนะรัมจิตตะสวาหะ
	Romanised	Om na ramachitta sawaha
	Probable text in correct Pali	โอม น รม จิตฺต สฺวาห
	Translation into Thai	โอม จิตไม่ยินดีคือไม่ตกอยู่ในอำนาจของพวกยักษ์ เพี้ยง
	Translation into English	O may we not be in the giants' power, Amen.
Thursday:	Incantation	อมสักะโรติสวาหะ
	Romanised	Om sakaroti sawaha
	Probable text in correct Pali	โอม สกฺกโรติ สฺวาห
	Translation into Thai	โอม สักการะบูชา เพี้ยง
	Translation into English	O let us pray, Amen.
Friday:	Incantation	อมยุมัสสะวาทีสวาหะ
	Romanised	Om yumasawatee sawaha
	Probable text in correct Pali	โอม ยมสฺสวาที สฺวาห
	Translation into Thai	โอม ขอสรรเสริญพญายม เพี้ยง
	Translation into English	O praise the Guardian of Hell, Amen.

15) The Pali passages have been reconstituted by Acharn Swasdi Pinichchandara, of the Department of Languages, Kasetsart University.

Saturday:

Incantation นะโม พุทธาระกะนังอิติปิโสภัคคะวายักษาผลายันติสวาหะ

Romanised Namo puttarakanang itipi so pakawa yaksaa palayanti sawaha

Probable text in correct Pali นโม พุทฺธาน อิติปิ โส ภควา ยกฺขา ปลายนฺติ สฺวาห

Translation into Thai โอม ขอนอบน้อมพระพุทธเจ้าทั้งหลาย แม้เพราะเหตุนั้น พระผู้มีพระภาคพระองค์นั้น ยักษ์ทั้งหลายย่อมหนีไป เพี้ยง

Translation into English O let us pray to all forms of the Buddha, because of his power to chase away the giants, Amen.

Sunday:

Incantation อมนะโมพุธธัสสะ อมนะโมธรรมมัสสะ อมนะโมสังคัขสวาหะ

Romanised Om namo puttasasa; om namo tammasasa; om namo sangkasasa sawaha

Probable text in correct Pali โอม นโม พุทฺธสฺส โอม นโม ธมฺมสฺส โอม นโม สงฺฆสฺส สฺวาห

Translation into Thai โอม ขอนอบน้อมพระพุทธเจ้า ขอนอบน้อมพระธรรม ขอนอบน้อมพระสงฆ์ เพี้ยง

Translation into English O let us pray to the Lord Buddha, to the Dhamma, and the Sangha, Amen.

Among the Mons, the rituals observed for the dead are different from those of the Thais. The cause of death as with the Thais is an important consideration: if one dies 'well', that is, naturally, then one may be accorded traditional honours. But if the cause of death is due to an infectious disease or an accident, such as a gunshot wound or drowning, then the body is given no ceremony and buried in the temple area where cremations normally take place with as much haste as possible. No cremation (T: phǎwsòb, M: caoŋ fɛɔʔ) is permitted for fear that evil spirits will rise into the air with the smoke from the funeral pyre. Cases of natural death however are treated with much ceremony. The body is washed in the house, wrapped in a shroud and placed in

a coffin. A kind of cloth canopy is erected over the coffin, supported by six posts, three on each of the long sides, with white cloth suspended from each; traditional sleeping mats are placed underneath the coffin. No candles are placed around it. Ceremonies in memory of the departed take place in the house around the coffin for three to seven days before the body is taken to the temple where it may either be placed in a 'store' (T, M : koodaŋ), sometimes for as long as one or two years, until an appropriate time has been arranged for the cremation (the months of March and April are popular, presumably because there is no work in the fields to attend to at these times), or else it may be cremated without further delay. As in Thai funerals, the coffin is taken three times round the pyre, headed by a priest, who breaks an old coconut over the face of the deceased when the body is in position on the pyre. In the procession, people try to hold the long sacred thread from the coffin, or hold on to those holding the thread. The firing of the pyre is always by means of rockets on guide-wires, as in the manner of royal cremations among the Thais, except that the officiating priest fires the rocket. Fire crackers are only used with a 'dry' funeral, that is, when the body has been kept for a year or so.

Dances of exorcism for spirits in living people used to be common, but are now rare, except at funerals. In these cases, when the body is at the temple, three or four women of any age, wearing *phaasîn* and *sabai*, dance the *khajɛɛ mɔɔn* either on the evening before the cremation takes place, or else on the same day as the cremation. They dance in front of the coffin, to the background of *phleeŋ mɔɔn* music led by the xylophone accompanied by other traditional instruments. Standing more or less on the same spot and effectively moving only their hands, they try to exorcise the ghost of the deceased.

The Mons have another category of supernaturals which they refer to as ghosts (T : phĭi, M : aloh) but which might better be considered as taboos. The obligation to observe these taboos is thought to have been inherited from the Mon ancestors. These are completely distinctive and have no obvious parallel among the Thais.

The universal taboo affecting all Mons concerns the tortoise (or turtle). All Mons have this tortoise tradition. If they see a tortoise

Fig. 18. Dancing in front of the coffin at a funeral to exorcise the ghost of the deceased

Fig. 19. Three women in the village of *Klong Mon*

M : ʔaruk) and do not want it, or can avoid it, they can say 'It stinks' (M : saʔ ɓoj) and pass on. But if they catch a tortoise or cannot avoid one, they must on no account let it go, and must take it to the house, cook it, and eat it in the form of a curry or whatever, after having first offered the head and the feet[16] (but not the tail which is thrown away) to the house ghosts in the spirit house. If however a tortoise is released the Mon ghosts are considered to have been offended and any subsequent calamity will be attributable to this act. Two exceptions are observed. A very large tortoise (possibly here a true turtle) must not be eaten; it is old and like an old person and so must be placed in the temple. A tortoise with letters carved on its underside, roughly about the thickness of a finger, is considered a protected tortoise since the characters are carved on tortoises raised in the temple : likewise it must be released in the temple grounds and not consumed. Tortoises of course are often kept in Thai village temples, but there is no compulsion to consume them should they be encountered away from the temple. The Mons themselves can offer no explanation as to why a tortoise is treated in this way and not some other creature. Many prohibitions have a practical origin in remote time. One possible explanation is that tortoises damaged, or were considered to spoil, the newly planted rice in the fields. In Hindu mythology a tortoise (turtle) is one of the forms of Vishnu and in the churning of the sea of milk Mount Meru was sometimes represented as reposing on the turtle's back; but the Mons interviewed seem unaware of this and deny any symbolism in or rational explanation for the selection of a tortoise as a taboo which they term a ghost. Mons have the choice of avoiding or absorbing the danger or sacred qualities represented by the tortoise, but the fears the animal arouses or symbolises are real and the taboo rigidly observed.

There are additional animal taboos which are not universal to all Mons but are restricted to certain families. These concern snakes (M : suum), chickens (M : caaiñ) and pigs (M : klɔɔik). Members of a

16) Halliday (*supra*) in noting this says that only sometimes are the feet and tail offered to the house spirit. He makes no exceptions to any tortoises, unlike the village observed, except for sea turtles. Halliday also mentions the head of the rice is offered at the same time; this is not the case in the village described here. There is the possibility of confusion in both Thai and Mon between 'turtle' and 'tortoise' since the same word, though different in each language, is used to designate both species.

household observe the taboo of the male household head, but women observe that of their husbands, even in cases where the husband has moved into his wife's family residence. But the avoidance/absorption feature of the tortoise taboo is not repeated. Snake families may not kill or eat snakes. Chicken families may not sell or give chickens (though they may raise them, eat them, and kill them), and pig families may not raise, sell, give or kill pigs, though they may eat them. As no Mons in the village raised pigs, they could not sell or give them, and they cannot ***a priori*** kill them. In practice it is therefore difficult to see in what ways a pig taboo family differed from any other Mon family (one possible explanation might be that all the persons in the village descended from a few 'pig families'). Pork is eaten however, being bought in the market, and offerings to the spirit house in a pig family would include pork when any is available.

No other animals are affected in this way. The cow is not reared but the explanation seems to be practical; the land is too muddy for it to be useful in ploughing and it is not as strong as the buffalo. Milk is not normally drunk by the Mons, as with most Southeast Asian people. But a buffalo may neither be killed nor eaten unless it dies. The fact that buffaloes live in close community with the Mons and sleep in the same house explains this practice; it is accorded semi-human status. In practice when it dies it is sold to a Chinese dealer who then retails the the meat in the local market, which all may buy to eat, including the Mons. Similarly, and unexceptionally, dogs and cats, sharing the house and much of the lives of the villagers, may not be killed or eaten.

TABLE 4

Mon hereditary animal taboos

	M	raise	sell or give	kill	eat	Notes
All Mons						
tortoise (turtle)	ʔaruk	×	×	√	√	
Some families						
snake	suum	×	×	×	×	(other families kill and eat cobras only)
chicken	caaiñ	√	×	√	√	(other families may sell or give)
pig	klɔɔik	×	×	×	√	(same as all Mons)

Animals not accorded hereditary "ghost" status

	M	raise	sell or give	kill	eat	Notes
buffalo	priiaŋ	√	√	×	×	(eat only if it dies)
cow	kəleeə	×	×	×	√	(absence is probably practical)
duck	teeə	√	√	√	√	
goose	teeəhâaŋ	√	√	√	√	(rare)
dog	kəlɔɔ	√	√	×	×	
cat	kooj	√	√	×	×	

No other animals are raised (e.g. goats, M : ʔəbet) or met with (e.g. monkeys, tigers M : ʔnɔɔj, kəlaʔ)--the jungle is too far away. There are no prohibitions concerning any fish, crabs, shrimps (M : kaaʔ, ʔʌtaam, ŋuuj) and other water creatures.

One would be tempted to speculate in Levi-Straussian terms that the Mon animal taboos fit into a scheme which rationalizing Westerners find acceptable. The universal hereditary taboo is both a land and a water creature, like the Mons themselves, and of the additional hereditary 'ghosts', one which is well known, the snake, is also a creature of the same two elements. With the two less well-known hereditary 'ghosts', the chicken is of two different elements, air and land, and the pig of land only.

TABLE 5

	water		land	air
ALL MONS	←	tortoise	→	
SOME MONS		(snake)		(chicken)
			(pig)	

Unfortunately for such theorising, however, there is another taboo which some families, not having additional animal taboos, maintain. This concerns sticky rice cooked in bamboo (T : khâawlăam, M : həlaam); this may not be prepared or consumed by families inheriting the tabooo. The prohibition stems from the bamboo, not the rice, for if the rice is taken out of the bamboo, after being cooked in this way, and put on a plate, it may then be eaten. In certain African countries the bamboo is considered the dwelling place of ghosts because they can hide themselves in the hollow stems unnoticed. Mons with this hereditary taboo when questioned denied the presence of ghosts but pointed only to the

requirements of family (ancestor) ghosts; bamboo is grown in the compound and neither feared nor despised. One can only speculate as to the origin of this taboo and wonder at its survival.

When questioned, the abbot of the village temple showed himself to be fully aware of Mon Brahminical and animistic beliefs (as he is a Mon himself, this is to be expected). He explained that those Mons (that is, almost all) who were unable to overcome their fear of ghosts and rid themselves of the taboo traditions had not arrived at a complete understanding of the Dhamma. He did not indicate that any serious attempt was made by monks to help remove these fears; it is easier to accept spirit placation practices as traditional than to remove them as being unorthodox or incompatible with Buddhist doctrine.

The continuation and cultivation of this active world of ghosts and 'ghost traditions', or taboos, may well be part of distinctiveness of an elite minority, having a more vigorous supernatural world than the alien majority around them. It is difficult to reconcile this intensively cultivated, and feared, world of the spirits and taboos with the brash modernity of the capital. It would not be surprising if these customs and traditions had survived in a remote and hermetic village, but it is unexpected to find this separate society existing, complete with its own language, within easy commuting distance of the world of skyscrapers, nightclubs and traffic jams. To some it might come as a pleasant relief to believe this could be possible. What makes these practices still more interesting is that most people have been assuming for a long time now that, specifically, the Mons were totally absorbed and no longer existed as an individual ethnic community, and, generally, that all minority groups and practices must of necessity disappear in face of self-evident modernisation. Neither of these assumptions is justified. Even young Mons having passed through all stages of secondary school believe firmly in the existence of this active supernatural world and observe all the traditional taboos without questioning them. It is remarkable to observe the strength of the traditional belief system, even where Mons are also part of normal Bangkok working life. Even more so then with the Thais, the same person can function in two totally different systems without any apparent strain and with equal acceptance of both.

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