Ritual and Belief Systems: Anan Ganjanapan's Anthropological Political Economy

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Abstract

As is widely recognized, Anan Ganjanapan's contribution to the development of Thai anthropology is extremely wide, ranging from agrarian development, differentiation of the peasantry, labour control, land ownership, community forestry, to the topics of belief systems, ritual practices, morality, gender, and witchcraft. No Thai anthropologist so far has attained such wide coverage of anthropological issues. In most of his works, the wide range of social and cultural phenomena is put together in a holistic perspective that is placed in complicated and dynamic relationships in the political economy of the peasant society. This chapter is an attempt to reveal this particular brand of 'anthropological political economy', focusing on his analyses of rituals and belief systems in Northern Thailand.

Keywords: Anan Ganjanapan, anthropological political economy, rituals, northern peasant societies

บทคัดย่อ

เป็นที่ยอมรับกันว่าผลงานการเขียนของ อานันท์ กาญจนพันธุ์ ได้มีส่วนผลักดันสำคัญต่อการศึกษาด้านมานุษยวิทยาไทยอย่างกว้างขวาง ผลงานของท่านครอบคลุมตั้งแต่พัฒนาการของสังคมเกษตร การจำแนกความแตกต่างของชาวนา การควบคุมแรงงาน กรรมสิทธิ์ที่ดิน ป่าชุมชน รวมจนไปถึงเรื่อง ระบบความเชื่อ พิธีกรรมปฏิบัติ ระบบศีลธรรม เพศสภาพ และการใช้เวทมนตร์คาถา กล่าวได้ว่าแทบไม่มีนักมานุษยวิทยาไทยคนใดที่จะศึกษาค้นคว้าครอบคลุมประเด็นปัญหาเหล่านี้ได้เท่าที่อานันท์ทำมา งานศึกษาส่วนใหญ่ของท่านดำเนินไปภายใต้แนวการศึกษาวิเคราะห์แบบองค์รวมซึ่งให้ความสนใจกับความสัมพันธ์เชิงซ้อนและพลวัตรการเปลี่ยนแปลงในมิติด้านเศรษฐศาสตร์การเมืองของสังคมชาวนา บทความชิ้นนี้จะพยายามทบทวนและชี้ให้เห็นถึงการศึกษาวิเคราะห์ในแนว 'เศรษฐศาสตร์การเมืองเชิงมานุษยวิทยา' ที่ว่านี้ โดยจะมุ่งเน้นไปที่ผลงานของอานันท์ด้านที่เกี่ยวกับ ระบบความเชื่อและพิธีกรรมในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย

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Introduction

As is widely recognized, Professor Anan Ganjanapan's contribution to the development of Thai anthropology is extremely wide, ranging from agrarian development, differentiation of the peasantry, labour control, land ownership, community forestry, to the topics of belief systems, ritual practices, morality, gender, and witchcraft. No Thai anthropologist so far has attained such wide coverage of anthropological issues. In most of his works, the wide range of social and cultural phenomena is put together in a holistic perspective that is placed in complicated and dynamic relationships in the political economy of the peasant society. His works are not simply a political economy analysis but critical practices against the political economic structure involved in Northern Thai peasantry through which anthropologists try to detect the agency of the peasantry. This chapter is an attempt to reveal this particular brand of 'anthropological political economy', focusing on his analyses of rituals and belief systems in Northern Thailand.

Belief Systems Among The Northern Thai Peasantry

In his Ph.D. thesis: 'The partial commercialization of rice production in Northern Thailand (1900–1981)', Anan analyses the rice production and the structured socioeconomic differentiation of the peasantry in a village of San Pa Tong district, Chiang Mai province (Anan 1984a). This anthropological study examines the agricultural production system among the Northern Thai peasants, which is constituted of complex and dynamic forces based on certain relationships, including kinship, community relations, patronage linkages, market mechanism, and monetization of the traditional economy. Anan sees this production system, as inher-

ently contradictory and conflicting that is not a fully developed capitalist one, but a result of *incomplete development* of the commercialized production of rice, continuously maintained and modified from the early to late twentieth century.

With regards to this analysis, we note that Anan has not followed the Althusserian-Marxist framework of 'articulation of modes of production' that explains features of traditional societies in terms of their articulation with processes of capitalist formation. Although his political economy analysis is undoubtedly based on Marxist theoretical premises, Anan has been rather critical of neo-Marxian structural anthropology, and structural anthropology in general, in which social and cultural features are conceived in terms of the lawful and abstract relationships within structures, paying less attention to meaningful action by the subjects (cf. Ortner 1984; Roseberry 1988: 170–71).

Contrary to such structural analysis dominant in anthropology during the 1970s and 80s, Anan has expanded his analysis to cultural practices of the Northern Thai peasantry, based on the political economy of the Northern Thai production system. During the period from the mid-1980s through the 1990s his major research focus was laid on rituals and belief systems, and their relations to the reproduction of morality (Anan 1984b, 2532/1989, 2534/1991, 1991, 1992, 2536/1993, 2542/1999). In these studies he mainly deals with a variety of spirit rituals and the related practices, such as 'modern' spirit mediumship (*phi chao nai*), ancestor spirit cults (*phi pu ya, phi mot phi meng*), a guardian spirit cult of Chiang Mai (*liang phi pu sae ya sae*), the healing practices of folk doctors (*mo mueang*), as well as witchcraft (*phi ka*) as discussed in the next section. This particular focus on spirit beliefs and ritual

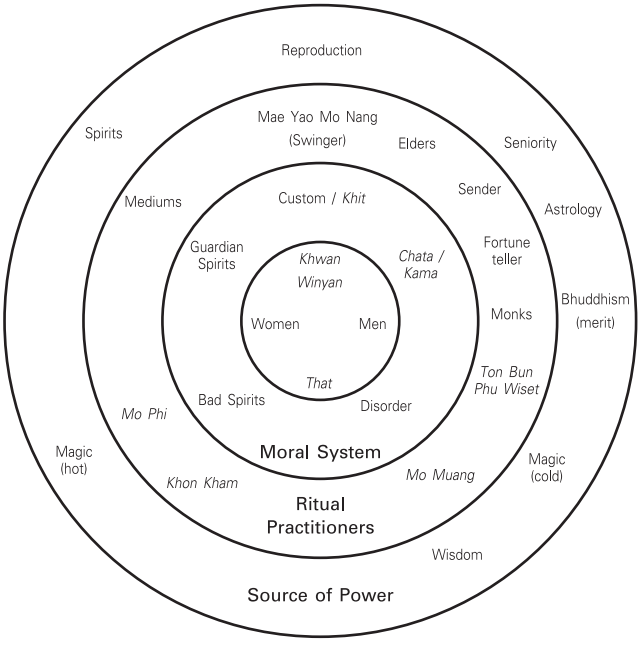
practices is derived from the fact that, according to Anan, contradictions and conflicts directly associated with the production system, increasingly evident in late twentieth century are richly expressed in spirit related practices by the Northern Thai peasants rather than in Buddhism which has generally been under the control of the dominant power in the society (Anan 1992: 2).

In order to illustrate an overall picture of the belief systems associated with these practices, Anan introduces the concept of 'power' that can control morality being closely associated with a variety of forces, affecting individual persons and their social relations. These powers include the Buddhist *kam*, magical power (*khatha*), supernatural beings (*phi*) and astrology (*horasat*). The power associated with reproductive significance is expressed in the notion of fertility and subsistence (*udom sombun*, symbolized by such objects as an egg, rice grain, a banana shoot, etc.). The notion of seniority (*avuso*) is also a power that denotes the respect of elders and their knowledge, often involved in ancestor worship (*phi pu ya*).

According to Anan, although these beliefs and their immanent powers have their own differentiated system in practice, they are unified in the people's mind in order to give meanings to contradictory and changing social reality. With such a view he shows, in a diagram, the structure in which the complex relationships of such beliefs and powers are organized (see figure). The structure consists of sources of power, ritual practitioners, and moral systems placed on circuits with the fundamental conceptions of human being (men/ women, *khwan/ winyan/ that*) at the centre. A particular feature of this arrangement is not a binary opposition of two elements as often shown in models of

structural analysis (e.g. Buddhism vs. spirit worship), but complex and flexible relationships of a variety of elements (e.g. Buddhist monasteries with a guardian spirit shrine; the Buddhist ordination ceremony in spirit cults). Anan is thus successful in illuminating the contradictory relationships between sources of power at the level of belief and ritual, reflecting the conflicting and changing aspects of social reality as being observable in the relations between men and women, the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, bureaucracy and villagers, etc.

Changing Power and Positions of Mo Muang in Northrn Thai Healing Rituals



Modified from *The Society of Siam: Selected Articles for The Siam Society's Centenary* (2004:87)

Anan conceives ritual not simply as a means of transmitting meanings as semiotic, symbolic studies often assume, but as a practice expressing the emotion and feeling of participants involved in the rituals, such as practitioners, clients, and onlookers. In this sense, Anan's position in dealing with symbols and rituals is close to that of Victor Turner who puts forwards a theory of symbolic representation in ritual, in which symbols are 'multivocal' and may stand for many meanings in a single form. Turner also contends that each symbol has polarized meanings; at one pole it relates to a human emotional experiences, arousing desires and feelings; and at the other pole it refers to social organization and its inherent norms and values; the former is sensory (*orectic*) and the latter is ideological (*normative*) (Turner 1967). It seems to me that Anan sees these two aspects of symbols as essential in understanding reproduction of peasant communities as a moral community. Thus, we should note that for Anan rituals and beliefs are not an abstract 'structure' but a means of evoking the emotion and feelings associated with the moral order of the peasant communities, which has been continuously threatened under the unequal and incomplete development of the production system. Here, the contradictions and conflicts caused by the unequal development are reflected through their emotional experiences in moral judgements, as Anan maintains:

> 'The emotion and feeling that the Northern Thai express in their rituals and beliefs indicate not the decline as a result of capitalist cultural domination but *a cultural reproduction in response to problems of unequal development*.... The cultural expressions as experienced in rituals are the attempt by local people

> to reproduce morality in a struggle to find alternatives to the problems as well as to change the power relationships between locality and the state which are the underlined causes of unequal development' (Anan 1992: 13, emphasis added).

Thus Anan explains that the rituals and belief systems are firmly linked to moral and cultural reproduction among the local peasants responding to and struggling with power relations that have been developed under the socioeconomic conditions in Northern Thailand continuously throughout the twentieth century. In relation to the Turnerian point of view, Anan seems to be convinced that the two poles – sensory and ideological (normative) aspects – are still active in many ritual acts, spells and songs, and the other objects used. In other words, the Northern Thai peasant rituals are altered surprisingly little in their symbolic aspects and have continuously expressed their emotions, feelings and the associated moral system vis-à-vis the political economic structure of the society (cf. Bloch 1986). According to Anan, however, this stability is explained as having two different processes: a unified, structural feature, and historical modification in details. While the structural aspect has remained largely unchanged, the individual ritual symbols and practices are distinctive and continuously modified as a result of complex processes of diffusion, assimilation, domination and reproduction, in terms of the context of changing social reality (Anan 1992: 1).

Such a view stressing both the *stability and plasticity* of rituals is shared with many anthropologists, including Irvine (1984), Shalardchai (1984), Tanabe (1991), Morris (2000) in Northern Thailand, and Bloch (1986) on the Merina circumcision rituals

in Madagascar. However, rather than stressing the stability of ritual structure, Anan is more plausible and successful in putting forwards 'functionalist' explanation of ritual changes to reveal recent modification and transformation, especially in the cases of spirit mediumship and its cults (*phi chao nai*) (Anan, 2532; 1992), and of healing rituals by folk doctors (*mo mueang*) (Anan 2543; 1991).

The spirit mediums – possessed by guardian spirits, mostly local deities – are seen by their clients as having supernatural powers in making prophecy, healing, and providing good fortune. Before the rapid socioeconomic changes took place in the 1970s, there had been at least one such medium, mostly a poor villager in almost every village, occasionally providing the services to their fellow villagers. However, 'professional' spirit mediumship, giving wider services to the general public, has thereafter become increasingly popular and increased in number both in rural and urban areas. This means that spirit mediumship was transformed into a profession as an avenue for the poor to make their living. Whilst the poor faced with uncertainties have still relied on the services of mediums for solving family problems and ill health, and for drawing a prize in the lottery, middleclass people have also become clients using such services for success in business, politics, employment, exams, etc. Thus Anan's analysis suggests that despite the symbolic aspects of the spirit mediumship having changed little, its role in the society has fundamentally changed – adapting to the spread of unequal capitalist development throughout Northern Thailand (Anan 1992: 11–12; also see Morris 2000; Tanabe 2002).

In this way, as Shalardchai Ramithanond has already exemplified in his pioneer work on Northern Thai spirit mediumhsip (Shalardchai 2527), Anan introduces a functionalist approach to explain the transformation of rituals, not only spirit mediumship but healing rituals by *mo mueang* and other ritual practices. His analysis also reveals differentiated responses between class positions (e.g. the rural and urban poor, and the middleclass people) to the services of spirit mediumship.

Witchcraft (*Phi Ka*) Accusation And The Social Order

Anan's functionalist approach to the ritual symbolism of the Northern Thai is a method applied in his anthropological political economy. Political economy analyses in general, including orthodox Marxist one, are basically functionalist in nature. His early works on the Northern Thai peasant society follow such a functionalist position to illustrate the dynamism of class differentiation among the peasants in terms of socioeconomic relations all through the twentieth century. In a functionalist view, class differentiation as a social phenomenon can fundamentally be explained by the changes occurring in economic factors, especially those in production, such as land and labour. Thus Anan's analysis reveals that the differentiation between the rich and poor peasants was founded basically on property relations from the early twentieth century that was gradually changing with an increasing emphasis on labour relations when he conducted his fieldwork in the early 1980s (Anan 1989). After completing this line of analysis, in the mid-1980s Anan began to direct more attention to the question of how such class differentiation and the associated conflicts among the peasantry is linked to ritual symbols and

practices. It is in this functionalist context that he has dealt with witchcraft (*phi ka*) accusations among the Northern Thai peasants (Anan 1984b; 2527).

Phi ka accusation is one of the classic topics frequently referred to in the ethnographic literature on the Northern Thai since the nineteenth century by European and American visitors. *Phi ka* is an inherited power through matrilineal descent (*sai phi diao kan*) to cause occult harm and injury to others that can be exercised unconsciously by its host (*possessor*). It has been widely believed among the Northern Thai that a *phi ka* attacks a victim to cause afflictions, which sometimes lead to death, because it loves to eat human internal organs. It is also a traditional discourse embedded in matrilineal descent groups and their ancestor spirit worship (*phi pu ya*), constituting an important part of the moral system of Northern Thai society. Thus violent events of *phi ka* accusation, often leading to displacement of certain individuals or groups of villagers, are believed to be an effect of this traditional moral system.

Anan's seminal paper on the idiom of *phi ka* is successful, if highly condensed, in illuminating *phi ka* accusations involved in the complex relationships between landholdings, matrilineal descent groups, the marriage system and relations of political power that have been undergone by the Northern Thai during more than a hundred years (Anan 1984b: 2527).

The paper is much concerned with the historical evidence of the incidents of *phi ka* accusation that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to contextualize the relationships between the *phi ka* beliefs and the socioeconomic differentiation in the North, especially in Chiang Mai. Drawing

mainly on the writings of foreign visitors to the North in that period, he elucidates the fact that such accusations had been frequently used by minor *chao* (aristocrats of the Northern Thai royal family) who could confiscate the land properties of the accused for their personal benefit. Behind this forced migration, according to Anan, there were intensified tension and disputes over the rice fields between the newly emerging rich peasants and the declining minor *chao* who had been losing their control over the caravan trade and the teak industry. Thus Anan identifies the contradictory relations over landholdings that had been caused by land enclosures and appropriations under the commercialization of rice production in the late nineteenth century, as he maintains:

> 'This expulsion was made possible not simply because most peasants believed in *phi ka* but also because they felt their lives disrupted by the development of social differentiation within their villages and because they believed the rich peasants to be the cause' (Anan 1984b: 326).

Based on his fieldwork in a village in San Pa Tong district, Anan subsequently pays more close attention to the changing features of *phi ka* accusation in the early twentieth century. He maintains that the *phi ka* accusation had been inherently linked with matrilineal descent groups and their rule of uxorilocal residence among the Northern Thai. During that period, the northern quarter of the studied village was lived in exclusively by those accused of being *phi ka* who were the members of two descent groups that had lost their land to the *chao mueang* of the Chiang Mai royalty and worked as tenants on royal fields (*na luang*). Thus the landed descent groups felt threatened by the

landless and the needy, and were deeply concerned about losing their land to the latter through marriage. As land reclamation became limited and land disputes were intensified, allegations of specific individuals as being *phi ka* and discrimination against, if not direct accusations, those who belong to their same descent groups continuously occurred in the village. Thus Anan states:

> The idiom of witchcraft thus provided a cultural means of differentiating the village population, preventing certain groups of people from entering into conjugal relationships with others' (Anan 1984b: 328).

The idiom of *phi ka* has long helped landowners to differentiate themselves from others in the village communities by way of violently excluding those others from gaining access to land. Related to this differentiating function of *phi ka* representation is the fission of descent groups caused by marriages between women from the *phi ka* descent and men from non-*phi ka* groups. Anan also argues that the increased tension and conflicts associated with access to land has led to a separation of the villagers into two groups which, according to Anan, reflects a radical development of rural class structure *consciously expressed* through the idiom of whitchcraft (Anan 1984b: 329). Perhaps for Anan, the topic of phi ka accusation and violence seems to be one of the most appropriate ways to illustrate the complexity of contradictions and conflicts, and their articulation with ritual symbols, underlying the early stages in the development of agrarian classes in Northern Thailand.

Then Andrew Turton (1977) has remarked that among the Northern Thai villagers a variety of 'rituals of expulsion' to drive away evil spirits and to call and bind the soul of the individual

person kept in the body (*hiak khwan, hong khwan*), are held at moments of weakness and crisis such as sickness, loss, fear, anxiety, departures, and homecomings, etc. In these ritual practices, he argues, the villagers' social identities and statuses as members of communities, servants, subordinates and dependents, are continually recognized and accepted, hence the social order is repeatedly established. The frequency and repetition of these ritual practices in everyday contexts, rather than as exceptionally special occasions, seem to be important in such ideological reproduction. Turton thus contends that by a recalling of the supposedly scattered soul parts back to the body, they are 'reconstituted' as *a whole person*, or as a social subject within the social order established by the dominant class (Turton 1984: 44–45).

Combining the cases of *phi ka* accusation and the 'rituals of expulsion', it would then be possible to argue that while the Northern Thai peasants are constituted and reconstituted as a subject through such 'rituals of expulsion' to fit in well with the established social order, they also practise real violent expulsion, displacement, and discrimination against the accused individuals and their matrilineal groups through the discursive practices of *phi ka*. They are reconstituted as a subject in different ways: a most 'existential-inclusive' mode of ideological address, on the one hand, and a most 'substantial- exclusive' mode, on the other (cf. Turton 1984: 45). As Anan's works suggest, we can discern that the *phi ka* displacement as well as a series of 'rituals of expulsion' has served to solve, if only to a certain degree, contradictory relations within the community, as an effect of 'ideological reproduction' articulated with the moral system and its associated symbols and practices.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have outlined so far Anan's anthropological political economy of the Northern Thai peasantry, focusing especially on their rituals and belief systems, and witchcraft accusations. One aspect of anthropological political economy is, as Anan's works have clearly demonstrated, to investigate social and cultural phenomena with close attention to how people act and get a living within the structures of power that shape, limit and constrain their activities and knowledge. His functionalist position that is inherent in political economy studies offers him quite a wide range of analyses concerning the complexities of class differentiation, kinship, belief systems, ritual symbols and practices, and moral codes that are experienced by the peasantry.

We should note here, however, that functionalist analyses inherent in political economy studies, especially in Thailand, have mostly failed to account for the complex relationships of causation between factors in favour of resorting to a crude 'theory of determination' in which productive forces and relations of production determine 'ideological reproduction'. An exception to this are Anan's works that have been able to escape from such a rudimentary failure, as I have discussed before, perhaps due to his persistent and close observation among the Northern Thai peasants, and to his meticulous 'relational' analyses of the complexity of factors; material, symbolic or ideological.

In my view, what anthropological political economy illuminates should be not only a structure, within which actors are reconstituted as a social subject, but also ways in which its 'agency' copes with – actively, flexibly or reflexively – the changing socioeconomic and cultural relations, if still under the dominant

power structures (cf. Tanabe 1984; Ong 1987). As Sherry Ortner (2001) put forwards recently, anthropological political economy could find first an 'agency of power' which engenders, whilst being counteracted by an 'agency of resistance'. In addition, there is an 'agency of (culturally constituted) intentions' going beyond the reactive opposition to power. Anan has described such an oppositional 'agency of resistance' among the rural poor in his earlier works I have dealt with in this chapter. But in his later works, mainly from the early 1990s onwards, he began to deal with an agency that has a variety of intentions and imagination, as often observable in resource management and community forestry among the Northern Thai and other hill dwellers (Anan 2000). In the extension of these recent works, perhaps we could identify an 'agency of intentions' that creates desires, purposes, projects and new communal relations in emerging and transforming communities, associations and networks in recent years (Tanabe 2008).

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx (1983: 169) wrote: 'We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process'. It is on this materialist premise and spirit that Anan Ganjanapan has consistently contributed to the anthropology of the Northern Thai peasantry with his meticulous and rigorous analyses in anthropological political economy, for which we would like to express here our hearty thanks to him.

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