

The Shrine of Tao Mahaphrom or Bhrama

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Abstract

This article is the result of a field research on the function and meaning of the shrine of Tao Mahaphrom in the context of urbanization (or urban life), the relation between deities and Buddha in the Thai people's belief; the city people's reason for worshipping Bhrama, a new urban myth about this shrine, the contrast between the landscape of the modernized city and the shrine which symbolizes cultural aspects of the Thai tradition.

Introduction

Ordinary Thai people worship sacred objects like the images of Buddha and Hindu deities, such as Indra and Vishnu; they also worship guardian spirits, spirits of former living heroes and heroines, and lesser spirits such as the spirit in the banyan tree as it is generally believed that most spirits living in big trees are benevolent.



The Shrine of the image of Buddha.

They worship these entities primarily in order to ask for the granting of a wish or favour, and to render thanks when the wish has been granted.

Although such worship can be viewed as belief based on superstition, I think it is significant because it is so integrated into the fabric of Thai life that it has become a "custom".

I must first make it clear, however, that the overwhelming majority of the Thai people are Buddhists, and the Teaching of the Lord Buddha guides their lives. The worship of these various deities is always subsidiary to Buddhism.

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worshipping Bhrama, a new urban myth about this shrine, the contrast between the landscape of the modernized city and the shrine which symbolizes cultural aspects of the Thai tradition.



The Shrine of Tao Mahaphrom.

1. Location : the site of the beautiful shrine of Tao Mahaphrom, or Brahma, the highest god of Heaven, is in the grounds of the former government – owned Erawan Hotel, which is now the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel, at the centre of downtown Bangkok at Ratchaprasong crossroads, less than one kilometer from the Siam Center skytrain station and opposite the Police Hospital. The private sector rented the land where the old Erawan Hotel was situated and built a new hotel, the Hyatt Erawan. The plot of land where the Brahma Shrine is situated, which is about 100 square metres, has also been rented.

At the centre of the four-sided open shrine sits the handsome golden God. He has four faces and eight hands. Each of the four right hands from back to front holds the chakra, a staff, a pot and is placed on his breast respectively. Each of the left hands from back to front holds a sceptre, Hindu scriptures, a conch shell, and a string of beads respectively.

2. The story of Brahma and the construction history

According to the Hindu scriptures there are three major gods, Vishnu, Siva, and Brahma, each possessing different moral principles, level of greatness, and performing different types of miracles. The three gods are collectively called “Tree Murati”. Brahma is believed to have originated himself and to have created all things in the world. Besides creating the world, Brahma also created heaven and human beings.

The origin of Brahma is a rather complicated story because there are many versions. Some say that Brahma originated inside a golden egg; some say that he originated inside a lotus sprouting from Vishnu’s navel while he was sleeping on the Naga King in the Ocean; some say that Brahma is the split image of Vishnu at the time he created the world.

The shrine, built in 1956, has an interesting history. It was built by the Erawan Hotel management. A string of misfortunes occurred during the construction of the hotel. One mishap followed another, culminating in the sinking at sea of a ship bringing marble for the hotel’s construction.

This was too much for the superstitious construction labourers. There must be evil spirits haunting the place, they said. They demanded that something be done about it, or they would lay down their tools. The Board of Directors designated Police Major General M.L. Jare Suthat, the construction supervisor, to consult a Brahmin expert, Rear Admiral Luang Suwicharnpat

who informed the management that firstly, the laying of the foundation stone was not done at an auspicious moment; secondly, since the name “Erawan” already chosen for the hotel was the name of the three headed elephant which Lord Brahma rides, the “Erawan” ought not to go riderless so Brahma should be there too. So the shrine for Lord Brahma was built in the hotel grounds and from then on, there were no more accidents.

A shrine for the land spirit was also constructed and an offering ceremony was performed. Mr. Jitr Pimkowitz, a sculptor at the Handicrafts Division, the Fine Arts Department of the Education Ministry, was the designer and molder of the Brahma image which was made of gilded plaster. The image was designed to match the plan and the architectural design of the shrine by Mr. Juerawee Chomseewee and M.L. Poom Malakoon. The shrine was completed on November 9, 1956. The Erawan Hotel management and staff have since then made November 9 the day of a major ceremony to worship and make offerings to Brahma at the shrine.

The general public follow the Brahmin expert’s advice on the worship and the making of offerings; they believe that the appropriate times for the worship are from seven to eight a.m. and seven to eight p.m.; a wish will be granted if one asks for his divine assistance in the evening after which Tao Mahaphrom is believed to retire to heaven for the rest of the day. However, some say he stays all day and all night to look after all of us, and also enjoys watching Thai traditional dance which is why it is performed in front of his shrine every day.



Objects offered for worship.

When requesting a favour, one must make offerings, consisting of seven krathongs, (a container made of banana leaf) each with flowers of seven colours (any kind of flowers), seven krathongs of chopped sugar cane and seven krathongs of popped rice, each decorated with a rose, seven pure wax candles, two coconuts with green skin but with top and bottom sliced off, a bunch of bananas, and seven joss sticks.

The seven joss-sticks must be offered on every occasion of worship but may be omitted if it is absolutely impossible to obtain them, as for instance when you are abroad, in which case you may simply wai* and just pray.

When worshipping at the shrine, one may also offer seven pink or white lotus flowers, roses, garlands of jasmine or of other flowers, depending on the strength of your devotion. After that you should say the following sacred words:



Someone making a wish for something.

“I express my worship of the Great Lord Brahma, Lord of the Heavens, with these offerings. May he be happy and, with his great kindness, make me happy too, bless me with progress and prosperity, make me strong and free from sickness, give me a long life and allow me to find the means to make a living.....etc.”, then the additional wish can be made.



When one's wish is fulfilled, a special dance performance is offered to the deity.

* Wai is a sign of greeting or worship made by raising both hands, palms joined, to a position lightly touching the body somewhere between the chest and the forehead.

Tao Mahaphrom, like other gods, is believed to appreciate Thai traditional dances. When one's wish is fulfilled, a special dance performance is offered to him.

These special dances are called "Blessing Dances" which are as follows:



The song which accompanies the dance.

1. "KRIDABHINIHARN DANCE"

In this dance, the dancers are supposed to be celestial beings who come from their heavenly abode to greet the honoured congregation. The dance is accompanied by the scattering of flower petals which is symbolic of our salutation and good wishes to the audience. The meaning of all this symbolism may be gathered from the song which accompanies the dance.

2. "TAVATIMSA DANCE"

This dance is typically Thai and begins with slow-tempo movements which gradually increase to quick-tempo. These movements with the quickened rhythm which originally signifies the morbid feeling of repentance changes in meaning to that of joy and exultation. The song describes the beauty and graceful forms of the celestial beings who inhabit the Tavatimsa heaven.

The fees for the dances depend on the number of dancers: 260 baht for a dance with 2 performers, 360 baht for a dance with 4 performers, 610 baht for a dance with 6 performers, 810 baht for a dance with 8 performers. The length of the dance usually does not exceed 5-10 minutes.

Each dancer and musician gets 20 baht per performance and each earns about 800-900 baht a day.

There are four dance troupes stationed at the shrine, the first, "Tipyosot", performs from seven to ten a.m.; the second, "Damrougsilpa", from ten a.m. to two p.m.; the third, "Jongkornsilpa", from two p.m. to six p.m.; the fourth, "Roumsilpa", from six p.m. to ten p.m., which means that each performer works 4 hours a day. All the groups are under the supervision of Mana Lamom a 65-year-old expert who manages the dance schedule.

The performers are all related; they are from Lahn-luang district where Thai classical dancers and musicians live. Mama Lamom says that the troupes are pioneers and they are happy to serve Tao Mahaphrom. Although they do it for a living, they are also happy to share the profits with Thai society through the "Erawan Hotel Brahma Shrine Fund".



All kinds of people come to worship at the shrine.

All kinds of people, rich and poor alike, come to worship at the shrine and make donations and offerings. An offering, big or small, cash or other objects, can be made at any time. Humble offerings take the form of flowers, sweet-smelling garlands, gold leaf and food (all kinds of food except meat); however, if you can afford it, Thai traditional dance is appreciated. Also another favorite offering to Brahma is a carved elephant.



They also have teak elephants for sale.

Along the sidewalk in Ploenchit Road near the Rajprasong crossroads you can see several groups of garland makers and vendors, busily threading jasmine flowers onto lengths of cord. They also have teak elephants in various sizes for sale.

Some owners of the stalls who have been selling objects for the offerings in this area for more than thirty years, report that formerly many stalls set up by selfish vendors, created traffic problems so they were prohibited by the municipality. Only twenty-seven stalls have been given permission to continue the business and the owner of each stall pays a fee of 150 baht per month for the space and the cleaning of the area. How much they earn, selling objects for offering, is a secret.



Donation box for the Brahma shrine fund.

The Erawan Hotel Brahma Shrine Fund has been set up with, the money from donations and offerings, part of the fee paid to the dancers and even the reselling of the wooden elephants that have been consecrated to the Lord Brahma.

The Fund is put to good use in the community. In 1988 the Tao Mahaphrom Erawan Hotel Foundation was set up with its office in the parking lot inside the present hotel to manage the fund. The money is deposited separately in many banks and the Board of The Erawan Hotel Brahma Shrine Fund meet and agree on the division of the fund among public hospitals and other charities. From the opening of the shrine in 1956 up to the year 2002, a total of 550 million baht had been collected. An example of how the fund is put to good use is that part of the money has been donated to more than 300 hospitals all over the country to purchase modern medical equipment.



The view, the shrine is under the skytrain.

The environment of the shrine has changed but the function and meaning remain the same: Brahma is an important holy being—a major image of reverence and faith, and a spiritual support for the general public. Men and women who come to pay homage to Brahma are of all age groups, social status and from all walks of life. Foreign tourists from Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan make up 90 percent of the worshippers and only 10 percent are Thai. This information is from statistics collected from receipts for money paid for dance offerings. They all have faith in Brahma and they come to pay him homage and to learn about the myth. The number of visitors is rising every day as people are convinced that he has the power and grace to grant them happiness and peace. Modern people are burdened with personal and economic problems, which is why they seek spiritual support. Some of them resort to making offerings and asking for blessings from a deity, in this case Brahma.

How is the worship of Brahma relevant to a Buddhist? A true Buddhist usually considers the worship of Brahma a kind of superstition. However, both city people and country people believe in guardian spirits like their ancestors. So it is easy to understand why they believe in Brahma, the creator of all things in the world and the originator of himself; Bhrama, who has a good disposition, serenity and the highest moral principles. He is the embodiment of kindness, mercy, goodwill, and equanimity. These four qualities comprise the “Conscientious Behaviour” corresponding to the Buddhist concept of “Brahma-vihra”

The Buddhist Canon mentions Brahma who invited Lord Buddha to preach the teachable living things. When Lord Buddha rose to heaven to preach to his mother who lived in the second level heaven, Indra and Brahma accosted him and held an umbrella for him on his way back to earth. This is one reason why the Thai people integrate Brahmin customs and ceremonies with Buddhism.

A Buddhist usually feels a harmony with peoples of other faiths and even pays respect to objects of worship of other religions in an appropriate manner in the same way as he or she may pay respect to other people’s parents.

Buddhism teaches tolerance. Its followers are taught to accept peoples of other races and religions. Buddhism does not teach discrimination.

On the contrary, it declares that respect should be paid to all those to whom respect is due.

Although, nowadays the view of the shrine is dominated by the skytrain, a symbol of materialism and modernization, the shrine remains symbolic of traditional values and culture. It co-exists with all the aspects of change in the life of the Thai people who still look for an answer to their spiritual needs.

