

TEA LEAVES

Setting up a spirit house in Chiang Mai

Ancient ceremony is believed to keep homes safe in Thailand



Brahman priest Por Sawan sprinkles water over attendees during a ceremony to establish a spirit house at the new home of Ian White and Sopha Leelidpikorn in Chiang Mai, Thailand. (All photos by Ron Emmons)

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It is 8 a.m. on a Monday morning, a time when I am usually enjoying breakfast and planning what stories to pitch to editors. But today is different.

At this early hour I have joined two friends -- Ian White and Sopha Leelidpikorn, an English/Thai couple -- at their new home on the banks of the Ping River in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a ceremony to establish a spirit house. The timing of the event, as well as the location and orientation of the spirit house, have been determined by a Brahman priest named Por Sawan, who turns up in a pick-up truck with his assistants and all the

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Though spirit houses are a frequent sight in Thailand, visitors might be surprised by this animist tradition in a country that is predominantly Buddhist. The explanation is that Buddhist tolerance embraces beliefs that predate the arrival of Buddhism in Thailand. It is not unusual to see such shrines, even in the compounds of Buddhist temples.

Spirit houses are far from an isolated example of non-Buddhist beliefs in Thailand. Indeed, the coronation of a new monarch is not complete without consecration rites performed by a Brahman priest, and the annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony, which marks the beginning of the rice-growing season, blends both Brahman and Buddhist rites.

Thais (and some resident foreigners) believe that providing a home for the spirit of the land on which a house is built will afford them protection from natural disasters such as flooding or earthquakes and help them to face life's challenges, such as exams, work and love, as long as the spirit is honored with regular offerings. The shrine in which the spirit (*phra phum* in Thai, or less formally *jao tee*) takes up residence is called *san* in Thai, so a spirit house is referred to as a *san phra phum*.



Left: Traditional offerings for the earth spirit, "phra phum." Right: Phra phum settles into his new home.

As we walk past the couple's new home, which is a snug-looking, English-style cottage surrounded by a trim garden and enormous trees, it strikes me that this place hardly needs protection in such a secluded spot. Yet when we arrive at the river, I see that recent high water has eaten away a chunk of the opposite bank, exposing the roots of a huge rain tree that seems about to topple onto the building beside it. I realize that these days we can never be sure when a natural disaster might appear on our doorstep, so perhaps the presence of a powerful and friendly spirit is not a bad idea.

At the riverside, a cement rectangle marks the spot on which the new shrine will be erected. The assistants bustle around, setting up trestle tables to hold *bai sri* (conical offerings made of banana leaves, jasmine and marigolds) as well as containers constructed of banana stems that hold fruits to please the spirit. All the offerings are entirely natural, with no sign of any plastic bags or wrapping, making this one of the most eco-friendly ceremonies I have ever attended.

I am impressed by Por Sawan's combination of ancient tradition and modern technology: He wears the traditional white outfit of a Brahman priest, but also carries a tiny microphone and amplifier, through which he begins chanting. He places a brass statuette of phra phum, who carries a sword and bag of money to represent power and wealth, on a jasmine garland in his palm, then rotates a ball on a string above the figure. Later I learn that this is a critical step in persuading the spirit to accept its new home.



"Bai sri" -- conical offerings made of banana leaves, jasmine and marigolds -- along with other items to please the spirit, adorn tables at the ceremony.

After more chanting, White places small offerings of flowers and coins in a recess in the cement base where the shrine will stand, and within five minutes the assistants have erected the post, platform and spirit house, with a lower stand to accommodate offerings of fruit, flowers and incense. Tiny models of dancers, house attendants and animals are placed on the platform around the spirit house, and finally White sets the earth spirit in its new home.

At this point, Por Sawan chants some more, swings his ball on a string beside the spirit house and politely asks phra phum to take care of the new inhabitants. Then he rings a bell and with a fistful of coconut fronds sprays everyone, including the spirit house, with ceremonial water. Abruptly, the chanting stops and the ceremony is over.

Before Por Sawan leaves, he makes a quick tour of the cottage and sprinkles more water to bless the ornaments and furnishings. We follow him round, and after he has left we retire to a pavilion by the river for coffee and cakes.

White lets out a sigh of satisfaction. "I'm so glad that we've set up a home for the jao tee to protect us," he says. "We'll make regular offerings, which I'm sure will help to create harmony between the spirit and human worlds."

Finally, I drive home with a full stomach and a great idea for a column about a new home for the earth spirit.

Ron Emmons is a contributing writer.

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