

Re-narrating the Folk Legend of Jaomae Nang Norn: Human-nature Contact between Local Ecological Spiritualities and Buddhist Hybridity

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Abstract

Tham Luang–Khun Nam Nang Norn cave complex in Chiang Rai province, Thailand, has been constellated with magic and cultural-natural deep history. The beliefs and practices of revering the mountain have been circulated among locals, especially the Tai Yai ethnic minority residing near the area. The mountain is believed to be animated by supernatural entities—one of which is a female ghost, Jaomae Nang Norn, whose legend became widespread in the rescue mission of The Wild Boars' football players and their coach in June 2018. In this paper, I posit that Tham Luang cave and the ecological spiritualities surrounding it deal intimately with a multitude of ecocultural and spiritual influences. Beliefs rooted in the mystic power of the ghost spirits and practices of magio-animistic Buddhism create diverse responses to the landscape. It also opens up a

liminal space in which the negotiation between local and national identity is juxtaposed. This liminal space represents the ecological realm of the mountain as a contested terrain for rural communities in resisting cultural dominance of Thai nation state.

Keywords: Jaomae Nang Norn; ecological spiritualities; ethno-ecological perspectives; magio-animistic Buddhism; cultural hegemony

Introduction

In oral tradition, myths and legends lie within pre-modern society where pre-political narratives necessitate an understanding of diverse environmental cultures. Arthur Frank, a socio-narratologist, explains that “human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationship constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose” (3). In addition, it is imperative to consider the nature of the story’s dissemination: what bond causes a myth to be continually retold and re-articulated? The answer might lie in how mesmeric the tales are in general—their captivating narratives, exciting adventures, inspiring characters, etc. Or, another reason might be that the stories share certain values that are relevant to a wide range of societies, over time. A possible explanation could also be that the tale has the potential to be narrated and interpreted from numerous viewpoints. Whatever the reasons are, according to James Phelan (4), an American writer and literary scholar, most literatures are justified by a narratological approach which is regarded as “narrative of rhetoric”. It could be explained that the narrator operates the story from a particular viewpoint and disseminates messages to specific group of audiences. That is to say, most narratives use tales as means of convincing the reader of its own goals and purposes. Elements of stories are purposefully selected, emphasised, altered, and/or ignored. These are always in constant flux. Jonathan Culler states that human actions and productions always have underlying systems to make sense of meanings. Such systems, therefore, comprise of social epistemology, concealment, resistances, and semiotics to make their meanings possible and convincing in relations to the contexts of a particular time (*Structuralist Poetics*, 5). The underlying concealment, confrontation, and negotiation in the tales can also be seen in Thai context; Thongchai refers to those narratives and oral literatures as “ahistorical past”. These oral myths and traditions have been localised, re-articulated, and processed under the Thai nation-making formation (“Modern Historiography in Southeast Asia” 257). Thai elites and conservative scholars take pride in the fact that their nation has never once gone through formal colonisation by the imperial Western world. Under its “long pedigree” and “noble past,” Thai nationhood legitimises national-cultural identity which is uncontested and monolithic (Reynolds 2006). Starting from the late fifteenth century, the premodern Siam (today’s Thailand) developed

strong sense of nationhood over adjacent neighbours such as Myanmar, Laos, Khmer, and Lanna Kingdom (a civilisation centred in Northern Thailand in the premodern epoch before falling under Siamese colonisation in the eighteenth century). After the late eighteenth century, the influences of colonialism and post-industrialism from Western culture have projected rigid separations, if not polar contrasts: nature vs culture, human vs nonhuman, logic vs sentiment, and male vs female, to name a few. With the Western account, the Siamese elites adopted the hierarchical dualism that suppresses folk cultures by promoting state-supported high culture and highbrow literature over other forms of folk literary traditions and beliefs. Conventional style of narratives was utilised to conceal the cultural pluralism that lies in folk oralities as well.

Rural eco-space was also classified as hostile and untamed, compared to the city-space in central core which was “under supervision” and “more civilised”. Depiction of nature, for the conventional narratives, employs one-sided portrayals of natural phenomena under the romantic lens or tamed parameter. This cultural dominance grows in size with the nation state’s power. Folk, nature-oriented traditions and storytelling from other ethnic groups residing in Thai state have been marginalised as the cultures of the “others”. Currently, many folktales and myths are localised to serve dominant narratives and are used to promote unified national identity. The “gloriousness” of the state has been entailed in folk culture of the ahistorical past to enable the making of the modern nation-state. The re-narration and suppression of folk cultures, their narratives, and eco-spaces lead to insurgency and resistance. Here, I identify these in the tale of Jaomae Nang Norn.

The legend of Jaomae Nang Norn is a fascinating example of how numerous, varying versions have been in circulation in different time periods. To my knowledge, the dissemination of this legend began around the late thirteenth century. Since then, it has been retold to present a wide array of cultural-natural histories within local communities to present the ethno-ecological perspectives on the animated mountain. The legend has not been solely re-narrated to emphasise shared values related to the Tham Luang ecological cave. Each version I collected from fieldwork on December 2019 reveals how the legend has become an intertext—being emphasised and altered for multiple interpretations. The varied versions of the tale reveal the locals’ strong spiritual connections with Jaomae Nang Norn as the legend is associated with insurgency among Tai Yai ethnic people who migrated from the Shan state of Myanmar. Many of them reside near Nang Norn mountain, bordering Mae Sai district in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and Tachilek town in Myanmar. The Tai Yai ethnic group is the largest of all Tai ethnic minorities, mostly residing in Northern Thailand where they have shared collective memories with the Lanna people. Their oral traditions have been well-preserved even though they were dominated by Myanmar during 1526–1776 before they migrated to Thailand (Prasert 2019). During the political unrest, Tai Yai’s manuscripts and books were burned. Therefore, their knowledge of traditional myths and legends has since

been transmitted mostly through memories of the elderly. Over time, these tales have blended with northern myths and landscapes. That is to say, in the new host environment, Tai Yai's shared memories have blended to create a dynamic diversity in the Tham Luang cave complex, and her legend. Yet, Tai Yai's oral traditions and memories are overlooked and often recede as subaltern voices. For the Thai state, many of Tai Yai are regarded as migrant workers who help bolster Thailand's economic development.

Thailand has to contend with cultural heterogeneity and ethnic plurality, with multiple belief systems intersecting one another—both culturally and religiously. The notion of religion-based tradition stretches out to multiple layers of narrative genre; superstition and rural Buddhism seem to blend in sophisticatedly. Andrew Johnson, in his article titled “Inside the Sacred Danger of Thailand's Caves”, examines this phenomenon by pointing out the blended belief systems of nature spirits and Buddhism portrayed in the search-and-rescue incident of The Wild Boars. Relevant to Johnson, Edoardo Siani's “Myth and Politics in Thailand's Cave Rescue Operation. *New Perspective on Southeast Asia*” addresses the dynamic diversity of local superstitions and an ascetic Buddhist monk partaking in the rescue mission. For Siani, however, there appears to be political implications in the form of Thai state's violence over the magio-animistic Buddhism of rural folks. Even though the supernatural belief of Jaomae Nang Norn was involved on the incident, it opened up discussions among locals and scholars on its non-scientific explanations. Kanya Wattanagun stresses that the relationship between the rescue mission and supernatural beliefs basically deals with “the attempt to use alternative approaches to remedy a precarious situation when technological knowledge did not yield a desired outcome” (68). Her argument, however, might not be sufficient to explain the intricate patterns of deep-rooted perceptions regarding the mountain spirits that blend in with rural Buddhism. The locals have never considered Buddhist prayers to be “alternative approaches.” According to the fieldwork data, the locals would have prayed regardless of any help from the outside. Rather, on a spiritual level, they feel grateful towards the mountain and its water-giving cavern system. With all these cultural phenomena, I explore the cultural contestations surrounding the legend of Jaomae Nang Norn taking into account ethno-ecological perspectives. The study will examine the three versions of the legend obtained from the fieldwork and contextualise them using the history of cultural insurgency in the rural communities.

Legend of Jaomae Nang Norn

The name Jaomae Nang Norn (meaning the great reclining lady) is derived from the geographical feature of the mountain Doi Nang Norn when seen from a distance—it is part of a mountain range, part of Daen Lao range in the Chiang Rai province in the northernmost part of Thailand. It resembles a reclining princess. The mountain range stretches from the north to the south along the borders between the Mae Sai

district in Chiang Rai and Tachilek, a town in Myanmar. It rises to an elevation of 2,555 feet and is approximately 10.3 kilometres deep. Doi Nang Norn is thus recognised as the fourth largest cave in Thailand (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2018). With countless limestone cave complexes, the mountain range features numerous stalactites and stalagmites which attract numerous tourists around the world each year. The mountain area consists of two forest types: mixed deciduous forest and evergreen forest. Many participants of my interview (2019) reported that the mountain is so abundant with natural bounties such as bamboo, konjacs, mushrooms, and small games like frogs, toads, tree shrews, and snakes. They consider the mountain a food bank where supernatural beings guard its resources. Keeping the spirits content brings about abundance, which in turn benefits the rural folks. With their lives thriving on the natural environment of the mountain, it follows as a natural consequence to be respectful to the Mother Nature animating the landscape.

The legend of Jaomae Nang Norn has come to be nationally and internationally known since June 2018, due to the search-and-rescue mission. Altogether, it took nine arduous days with international joint cooperation between the locals, Thai government, Thai Navy SEALs, US military, and world-renowned cave divers. Eventually, the trapped football team had been located at a tiny beach called Nern Nom Sao (lady's bosoms) by a pair of British cave divers. Interestingly, according to the fieldwork data, the locals believed that the Princess' bosom, which is regarded as a source of vitality, has helped the Wild Boars survive the ordeal.

The currently well-known legend of Jaomae Nang Norn is a tragic love story between a princess of Jinghong in Xishuangbanna (a far south city of China's Yunnan province and a prehistoric capital of Tai ethnicities) and a lowly stableman of unknown origin. Because of their difference in status, the king had forbidden their marriage. The couple thus ran away from the kingdom while the princess was pregnant. Exhausted, the princess rested near the Mekong riverbank while the stableman went to search for food. She waited for her lover until the next dawn without knowing that her lover had already been killed by the king's soldiers, who followed them since they left the kingdom. After finally learning about her husband's demise, she fatally stabbed her head with a hairpin. Locals believe that her blood has since become Mae Sai River. Her body lying from north to south has morphed into Doi Nang Non, while her womb into Tham Luang. Her pregnant belly has transformed into Doi Tung, her head Doi Chong, and her breasts Doi Mae Ya (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2018).

Nang Norn's legend and landscape stretch back into time. The legend reveals how myth and folktale function as geographical explanations of early people's mentalities. Affection towards Jaomae Nang Norn is reflected in the landscape and local spiritualities rooted among the locals in Mae Sai district and Tai ethnic people, particularly those of Tai Yai from Shan state who developed a close relationship with

the northern locals through migration and intermarriage (Bunma). Tai Yai ethnological perspectives of the mountain are linked to their traumatised memories of being dispersed from their homeland and coming to a new host environment, combined with their own native ecological perceptions.

Hidden Cultural Contestation in Jaomae Nang Norn's Legend(s)

After my fieldwork in December 2019 and the further exploration of Jaomae Nang Norn's legend, there appear threefold transitional phases that show the way in which elements of socioecology, transnational paradigm, and magio-animistic Buddhist narratives have been intricately developed and entwined.

Story 1: Ecological Agenda of Jaomae Nang Norn's Legend (late Thirteenth Century)

The tale of Jaomae Nang Norn runs deep even before the period of Siam, where ecological manifestation reveals substantial concerns about the mountain range, which is regarded as sacred and mysterious. According to Sisak Wanliphodom, a renowned Thai archeologist and historian, Doi Nang Norn was initially known among ethnic settlers as "Phu Sam Sao" (the three stones mountains) where Doi Tung was the main residence of the Lua lord (pu jao lao chok); Doi Pu Tao (also known as Doi Mae Ya) was for the Lua queen, and Doi Chong for their child. Sisak further explains his study by referring to Yonok Chronical (phongsawadan yonok) discussing the Lua ethnic people (also known as pu jao lao chok race) as one of the first inhabitants on the range before migrating down to Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. A descendant of Lua rulers, King Mangrai (1238-1311) later established the city of Ngoenyang (1261-1292) and then the Lanna Kingdom (1292-1311) respectively. The Lua people believed that the spirits of Phu Sam Sao animate landscape and protect upstream rivers for locals and the neighbourhood proportionately.

Sisak's claim resonates with the narratives of an eighty-six-year-old former spiritual liaison (Ta Inkam Najai) whom I had a chance to meet at Ban Chong village, Mai Sai district, Chiang Rai on December 2019. Unfortunately, due to his health, he could no longer speak, but his caretaker brought me to a dilapidated basement where several gypsum boards lay abandoned on the dusty ground. There, I found Ta Inkam's handwritten notes on the gypsum boards describing how the villagers helped excavate wells and shared water resources provided by the Nang Norn cave systems.

I also interviewed several local elders; one is a former headman named Por Luang Bunma of Ban Chong village (the northernmost part of Doi Nang Norn) who explained to me the intimate relationship between the legend and their day-to-day lives. For them, all the legends of Phu Sam Sao, Doi Nang Norn, and the Mae Nang Norn's tragic love with the stableman, remain influential. In almost every

household, there are water wells collecting plenty of water from Doi Nang Norn and locals still draw from these wells even today. In every dry season of each year, the locals organise a ritual to pay homage to the spirits of the cave. Interestingly, offerings used in the rituals are from the Brahmanic tradition, such as bananas, coconuts, eggs, pig's head, and new women's clothes. For them, the great cave represents Mae Nang Norn's womb which provide subsistence for all in terms of water, food, and shelter. There are two rivers emerging from the cave: the clear one can be used for everyday consumption and household usage; and the red-tinted one is forbidden for any kind of usage, lest bad omens prevail, as the locals believe it to be Mae Nang Norn's menstruation. This socioecological agenda lies alongside the locals' and the late Lua's spiritualities towards the mountain range. Such spiritual rootedness undeniably makes the area culturally rich. The presence of Doi Nang Norn as a sacred eco-space on which the locals rely for subsistence, has been shaping the locals' attitudes and behaviour towards the mountainous areas until the present day. The mountain has also inspired other people who have moved to the area to hold on to this ecological perception, retelling the stories to the younger generations.

Story 2: Tai Yai's Positionality as Transnational Worker Represented in the Legend of Jaomae Nang Norn

In the mid 1980s, Thailand's economic growth was influenced by labour migration in an unprecedented exponential degree due to national industrialisation. In *The Economic Contribution of Migrate Workers to Thailand: Towards Policy Development* Philip Martin presents a detailed study how migrant workers from Myanmar became a part of other foreign worker groups who contribute to Thailand's economic development. Among workers from Cambodia and Laos, 75% are registered labourers from Myanmar (ibid), and around a hundred thousand of them live and work in upper northern Thailand (Foreign Workers Administration Office, 2021). Motivating factors mobilising these migrant labourers to the north, according to Sirirat's *The Mobility of Burmese Labors in the Upper Part of Northern Thailand*, are stable income, higher wages, and finding a safe haven from Myanmar oppressive regime. The latter has led me to investigate the links between Tai Yai's perspectives on Jaomae Nang Norn and the Myanmar political unrest.

Again, when analysing the story of Jaomae Nang Norn, it is imperative to focus on the king's soldiers who did their job according to the king's command. For many Tai Yai who shared their reactions with me regarding the legend, those soldiers fall into the domain of culprits. The status difference between the princess and the stableman is indeed a huge obstacle to overcome, but without the assassination scheme, the couple might have made it through the ordeal and live a life together. The conflicts between the locals and the military administration at this point have been included in the legend. An anthropologist, Holly High, who has researched widely on the crisis of Laotian socio-politics and culture especially on myths

and belief systems, ascribes similar scenarios when rural Laotian tales of “Si Mueang” reveal the confrontation and contested terrain against the Lao state. Such implications resulting from the layers of contestations between the Tai Yai ethnic group and Myanmar’s military, open up a new way of understanding Jaomae Nang Norn’s legend. It emerges in the interviews that Tai Yai people liken themselves to the legend of Jaomae Nang Norn who are forced to leave because of oppression in their homeland.

The tragic fate of these migrant workers seems to be represented by Jaomae Nang Norn’s unsuccessful love. Once these workers evacuated into the new state, the associations of self, landscape, and local legend have been intermixed and re-articulated. This version of Jaomae Nang Norn’s legend then functions as an outlet for the distressed and frustrated emotions of Tai Yai.

The spirits of Doi Nang Norn somehow still occupy the Tai Yai people’s minds as well as those of the Chiang Rai locals. The reverence towards the cave spirit has been intensified since the football players got trapped in the cave and were saved. One third of the football players and the coach are from the Tai Yai ethnic group. Parents and other locals kept their hopes alive by appeasing Jaomae’s spirit by making a plethora of offerings such as incense, fresh coconuts, mangoes, papayas, rice cakes, carbonated beverages, and fruit juices to plead to her to spare their young ones (Gutman 63). Even after the search-and-rescue mission during which skilled cave divers, hundreds of troops, and world-class technology worked around the clock, Tham Nang Non continues to hold her mystic realm.

Story 3: The Emergence of Phra Kruva Boonchum: Buddhist and Cultural Revival among Migrant Workers and the Thai State

As discussed, from the mid 1980s onward, Thailand’s rapid economic growth spurred modernisation and substantial development which in turn brought a drastic change to both the cityscape and the countryside. Migrant workers were mobilised beyond the nation’s borders, providing massive services which helped grow Thailand’s economy. Legal immigrants would center around Bangkok, and the illegal ones throughout Thailand. Urban and rural contact zones however were stratified: Bangkok is the destination of modernisation, while rural areas are “barbarian backwardness” (Janit 113). The countryside is regarded as a place of market production, forking out raw materials and labourers to the city (ibid).

The indignities (meted out by the Bangkokians) and the uncertainties the Tai Yai migrant workers had to face pushed them to seek sources of protection, one such source was the folk legend of Jaomae Nang Norn. Since the Wild Boars’ incident, rumours of the angry Nang Norn spread beyond Mae Sai district. The spirit’s personification and her mysticism intricately fit into the Tai Yai’s and locals’ mentalities that perceive caves and the wilderness to be a spiritual sphere. Some of the Wild Boars’ parents got emotionally involved in the rescue and despaired, to

the point of condemning the curse of Jaomae Nang Norn. Then, along came Phra Kruva Boonchum, a Shan Buddhist monk, who has been regarded locally as Jaomae Nang Norn's lover in a previous life, appeared at the rescue scene. Some believed that the powerful desire of Nang Norn to meet and reunite with her former lover was one of the factors that led to the termination of the ordeal. Even though Phra Kruva Boonchum was born in Chiang Rai, he grew up in a Shan-speaking family who was dispersed from Myanmar. His reputation is well-known among the Tai Yai people—both in Myanmar and Thailand. The ascetic practices, retreats and his serious solitary meditation practices have been greatly revered by the Tai Yai who religiously follow the teachings of Kruva Sivichai, one of those who established the northern forest tradition. Apart from the help of world-class spelunkers and high technological support in this mission, many locals believe that the actual reason why the Wild Boars were safely rescued is mainly because of Kruva Boonchum. In his meditative state, Kruva claimed to have conversed with Jaomae Nang Norn and promised the children's parents that they would safely return home within a few days. Miraculously, Kruva's prediction came true—coincidentally or not. The tragic past of the couple and their unborn child brings about the successful delivery of the reborn football team.

Nine days into the arduous mission, the legend of Jaomae Nang Norn has then resolved into a ghost folkloric genre where magio-animistic Buddhism interlinked with other discourses. In contrast to many ghost novels and films, in which Buddhist monks would fix the "chaos," this version of Buddhist-folkloric legend introduces a local prestigious monk into the ecoscape. Again, we come to the notion of insurgency where the wilderness has been oppressed by the Buddhist monks. However, it should be noted that Kruva was not summoned by the central state, but rather he was a local forest monk wanting to help of his own accord. This fact opens up a new array of negotiations and religion-oriented hybridity. This intertextual transformation of the legend can bring us back to the relationship between locals (especially Tai Yai) and Thai state, in which the locals push to have their narratives compete against the grand narrative of the state. The emergence of Phra Kruva Boonchum helps propel those who uphold Tai Yai religion-oriented perspectives into the spotlight of "civilisation." They strongly hold magio-animistic Buddhist doctrines into practicalities. For instance, amid all the perplexity of getting lost and stranded, the football coach led the boys to practice meditation in the pitch-black cave, while the renowned Kruva Boonchum worked outside. These Buddhist tenets and the ghostly legend therefore blended together and turned into a historical and cultural revival of the tension between the Tai Yai and the state.

Considering the legend of Jaomae Nang Norn as a medium for the locals to re-vocalise their relationship with the central core, the thematic transformation from ecological conservation into socio-political negotiation of the latest legend coincide with what Arnika Fuhrmann stresses as "Buddhist Melancholia". She points out that to repair socio-political wounds, Buddhist-folkloric ghost stories come in handy

for a “...reexamination of past injustices and possibly lead to reparation” (64). In the case of Jaomae Nang Norn, by using Fuhrmann’s framework, the desire of Nang Norn to meet her former lover, the stableman in the new reincarnation as Kruva Boonchum, has linked the tragic past to the positive outcome of the rescue.

Today’s Jaomae Nang Norn

To the locals residing near Tham Luang area, the mountain crest still holds its mysticism and harbour nonhuman actors to the interplay. What strikes me however is the changes in the perceptions of outsiders. There is British cave diver Vern Unsworth who married a Mae Sai lady and has surveyed Tham Luang countless of times. In 2013, he explored the cave and created a map in further annotations (Gutman 30). At first glimpse, Unsworth describes the cave as “the scooping booty,” a place deeply beyond reach at the end of a treasure hunt for untouched nature. This notion evokes in me an uneasy reaction as it conveys the sense that the natural conqueror (from the Western viewpoint) is disrupting the practice of respecting the wilderness.¹ After a year since the incident, a BBC journalist Matthew Price interviewed Unsworth. This time, his interview, surprisingly, reveals a marked change of attitude towards Tham Luang. He says “since the rescue mission, every time he enters the cave, flowers would be made as offerings to Jaomae; after return to the upperworld, he would utter ‘kobkun’ (thank you) to the spirit of the cave who grants protection for his return.” This notion seems to be a leap change in a Western mind that seems to have now understood more deeply and imbibed Southeast Asian ecoreligious practices.

As for the Thai government, The Department of Provincial Administration made the grand gesture of granting nationality to the four football players who were “stateless” since birth (“Achieving the Impossible”). To look at how the Thai state operates in this situation, we might say that this is also a part of historical reparation. However, it should be noted that there are still a vast majority of Tai Yai who have yet to receive their citizenship, and that the Wild Boars are considered lucky to gain the state’s attention. According to Edoardo Siani, Jaomae Nang Norn’s legend manifests political implications of state violence in a significant account. In 2019, the Thai government elevated the status of Doi Nang Non Forest Park into that of National Park; and in 2020, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment

¹ In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young points out the idea of understanding our own culture and identity by comparing it to other cultures. With this gesture, other cultures are defined using differences. For instance, peripheries are drawn into the center in order to serve colonial desire and define the Orient. Using the Prime Meridian, the Longitude Zero at the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich, London as an example, Young demonstrates how the Occidental and the Oriental intersect. Young’s criticism of the Western view towards “the other” takes into account environmental violence, the conquering of natural territories and how nature has fallen into danger. Kim Taplin’s *Tongues in Trees* records that many woods and trees were brought down in 1987 particularly in the south of England “parade [ing] across our hills like occupying armies” (18) indicating by all means urbanisation and the progress of science and technology.

concluded a plan of designating Tham Luang an Asian Heritage Park. Recently, the cave complex and its ecological diversity have become a tourist attraction where local legend has been marketised and commoditised. Sisak Wanliphodom expresses sadly that this practice would endanger wildlife animals in the mountains, water resources, and the wilderness by and large. The spirit of the cave is once again facing unprecedented catastrophe.

Jaomae Nang Norn's Negotiation Frontier: The Narrative of Diaspora and Cultural Hybridity

Attitudes of valuing nature and seeing it as divine lead the locals to genuinely respect nature. As in the case of Jaomae Nang Norn's legend, local people and transnational workers in Chiang Rai have been trying to relocate their cultural identities within the environmental arena. For them, the mountains and forests are not only inhabited by supernatural entities and spiritual efficacies, but also represent the "beyond boundary" where cultural values and local identities within liminal spaces come into the negotiation with the Thai state. The concept of a diaspora, as cited in Barker (305), deals with the space of conflict where "the questions of who travels where, when, how, and under what circumstances" are greatly debated and where "diaspora space is the site where the native is as much as diasporian as the diasporian is a native". The diasporic space within the "dominant tradition" thus tends to be blurred; then entangled to form cultural hybridity. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, explicates the notion of "the in-between space" and "cultural hybridity" effectively. Bhabha's in-between spaces comparably refer to a liminal space between two places that mobilise in temporal dimension (53). In this space, cultural differences are hybridised and have also constructed "the ambivalent process, destroy[ing] mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, and expanding code" (54). Bhabha also uses Fanon's theory of "culture-as-political-struggle" (55) to explain the way in which the cultural reinterpretation produces "the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation where the cultural authority of the continuities and 'nationalist tradition' are destroyed (54). Emphasising on the need to think beyond narratives of singularity from hegemonic sphere and focus on "the interstices", Bhabha views this as the disruptive cultural enunciation against orthodox practices and authoritative hierarchy. Cultural hybridity, as theorised by Bhabha, thus establishes the new possibilities and social spaces where the inequalities, the minorities, and cultural differentiation can be heard and discussed. He elaborates,

“To see the cultural not as the source of conflict – different cultures – but as the effect of discriminatory practices – the production of cultural differentiation as signs of authority – changes its value and its rules of recognition. Hybridity intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence” (163)

It could be said that the in-between space can be used to counter the mainstream culture, religions, and identity where representations and binary opposition have been deconstructed. Using the postcolonial lens, Bhabha investigates colonial discourse where the colonist takes control and influences the cultural identities of the locals. However, in the in-between space, not only does the colonised disrupt the cultural purity, but also makes the colonist a subject of “mimicry” (123). This process creates the third space where locals’ cultural re-interpretation has been used for bargaining cultural authority by putting “the colonial subject as a partial presence” (123). This process of mimicry helps relocate cultural spaces and diaspora identities in the area of “the ambivalent other”—the mixing identities that is almost the same, but different.

Looking back to Jaomae Nang Norn’s legend, the third version of the tale involving Phra Kruva Boonchum reflects Bhabha’s mimicry. In normative narratives, elite Buddhist monks would be summoned by the state to help rural people exorcise evil spirits or give blessings. This could be seen in the classic Thai horror movie “Nang Nak”, where a Buddhist monk, Somdej To, was summoned by the state to exorcise the vengeful, jealous spirit Nak in the early Rattanakosin period. The exorcist portrayed in the tales has always been violent and oppressive towards Nak—also a shocking contrast to the Buddhist teachings of forgiveness, mercy, and peace. To put Nang Nak under control, Somdej cut off a part of Nak’s frontal cranium and kept it as a charm. In contrast, Phra Kruva Boonchum, the representative of a local forest monk strode into the cave’s crevices to converse calmly with the spirit of Nang Norn in reconciliatory manner. Myth and magic of Kruva Boonchum’s tale becomes the subject of the legend where local spiritualities have prevailed and been bolstered. The tale of Jaomae Nang Norn then reverses the hegemonic grand narrative. It also reveals the historical trauma where locals’ cultural/religious differences were considered unorthodox and uncivilised. The re-imagining of Buddhist monks therefore manifests the new meaning of Buddhist hybridity between state-sponsored monks and forest monks intricately.

For those of Tai Yai ethnicity, additionally, this negotiation of frontier with legend provides the paradoxical boundary between home and the world at large—it is what Bhabha calls “the unhomeliness” (6). Within this unhomely space, it creates

“the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (13). As a result, the grand scenery of Jaomae Nang Norn mountain ranges becomes parts of the extra-territory and the beyond barrier of cultural differentiation.

With all these confrontations and reinterpretations of the locals’ cultural narratives, the images of local identities represented in Jaomae Nang Norn’s legend unfold cultural integration. The portrayals of the locals’ religious beliefs in folktales are vividly manifested, as evidence in how rural people assimilate, adapt, and negotiate their positionalities with dominant narrative tradition. This fashion complies with what Yongyutha Chuven, a renowned Thai historian, calls “local liberation from Thai state’s domination” (138). The latter eagerly forms monocultural traditions throughout the nation by suppressing “other cultures”.

Images of Nature and Forest Buddhist Monks in Thailand

Orthodox Theravada Buddhism has played an important role in Thai culture. Citing Pattana, Peter Jackson states that “these everyday forms of religiosity serve as a discursive social space, in which political, economic, and cultural meanings are packaged, channeled, consumed, and contested” (*Mediums, Monks and Amulets* 826). Such notion is in correlation with Terwiel (1-2) who postulates that Thai Buddhism “cannot be described under a single rubric”. There are several distinctive strata of religious beliefs: animist folks who wholeheartedly believe in nature power, rural/unsophisticated Buddhists, and highly educated class Buddhism. However, among rural people, their magio-animistic aspects heterogeneously circulate around the worldviews and Buddhist tenets in relation to ecology (4). That is, the synchronic structure of local religion bridges the sophisticated Buddhism into local religious practices. This has occurred not only within their secular spaces, but also the extra-territorial environment. Kirsch points out that Thai religious system consists of “synchronic structural function” (241) where several distinctive traditions have combined and “upgraded” Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, for Kirsch, is regarded incomplete, and in rather a syncretic situation therewith.

Since the 1900s, Prince Mongkut (who would later become King Rama IV) tried to build up the centralisation of state-sponsored Buddhism within Bangkok by setting up Dhammayut sect and reforming Sangha order. This movement is regarded as the pivotal reformation of Buddhism in Thailand. The operation was later run by King Rama V and his half-brother Prince Wachirayan. This Dhammayut movement caused the emergence of a centralised, bureaucratic, and hierarchical religion whose monks emphasised Pali-scriptural texts (*vinaya*) and systemic Dhamma exam (*naktham*) (Subrahmanyam 182). Among the proponents, there are monks revered for their ascetic philosophy: Phra Ajarn Man Phurithatto (1870–1949), Luang Puu Waen Sujinno (1888–1985), Luang Puu Cha Suphattho (1918–1992), and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993), just to name a few. These monks are also known as *Kammathana* forest monks whose “walking in the wilderness, meeting many kinds of villagers, spending nights beneath a tree or a cave, and contending

with all sorts of mental and physical challenges” are all practices in the path to the enlightenment (Kamala 1997, 2). Unfortunately, these wandering, meditation-oriented monks are more likely considered to be “anomalous, unconventional, and heretical” (2). Even though they spurred out from the Dhammayut sect, their practices and traditions are rarely accepted by the Bangkok Theravada system. For Kamala, King Mongkut considered meditation as mystical and a waste of time (7). Such incompatible views between Bangkok Buddhist elites and forest monks thus leave massive contestation in Thai religious perceptions. As Arjun Surahmanyam, a Southeast Asian historian says, Dhammayut politics is “a grave crime in Sangha affairs and unhelpful to Dhammic practices” (194).

Nevertheless, these forest monks and their doctrinal practices push them to engage with ecology, as the name implies. Martin Seeger points out that Thai forest monks engage greatly against deforestations. The wilderness plays its part as spiritual sanctuaries and forest monasteries leading to “the ultimate freedom” (64). For Seeger, local Buddhism and animistic belief are “in a harmonious marriage” (64). For people in the countryside, *baan –wat–paa* (home–temple–forest) are but a syncretistic unit where secular doctrines could not be separated from the spiritual traditions and the sacred forests they are dependent on. Bialek considered Thai Buddhist ecology monks as a form of “engaged Buddhism” (3). He elaborates:

“Ecology monks draw from Buddhist concepts of impermanence, dependent origination, and suffering in conjunction with indigenous beliefs in forest and tree spirits to foster a relationship between the forest and human communities” (4).

With all these notions, therefore, the role of Phra Kruva Boonchum, necessitates locals’ and Tai Yai’s cultural narrative to foreground their voices and identities, and also to blur Thai monocultural tradition. The presence of Kruva Boonchum not only helps liberate local identities by pressing the impurity and disruptions into Thai religious monoculture, but also emphasises the mutual relationship between forest monks and the spiritual sanctuaries offered by the sacred mountains.

Conclusion

As a vibrant and vigorous piece of folk orality, Jaomae Nang Norn's legend becomes a good example of folk literature which is in a dynamic state of boundary crossing. When Jaomae Nang Norn comes into the milieu of cultural contestation, her eco-space reveals the configuration of power that re-vocalises "the powerless"—the diaspora. In its fluidity, the mountains represent the frontier of the impurity of cultural concepts. The roles of Buddhism in Thai socio-cultural fabric also entangle with the folk legends to reveal multi-rubrics of religiosity. The legend of Jaomae Nang Norn bridges the understandings of rural cultures and nature-oriented human-nature relationship in substantial account. It shows how locals venerate lands, waters, and mountains as parts of their daily life and practice their strong belief in magio-animistic Buddhism. The configuration of *baan* (home), *wat* (temple), and *paa* (forest) for those of the rural people, cannot not be segregated. Unlike most orthodox Buddhist monks whose Pali-scriptural study is the main practice, the forest monks advocate not only the learning of Buddhist dogmas but also ascetic meditation in forest monasteries and wilderness. Their practices have been considered as "engaged Buddhism" in which human lives, non-human agencies, and natural landscape are interlinked and hybridised. This helps create a new liminal space where cultural differences and environmental narratives conjoin aesthetically. Myths and legends are more likely to rouse us than pure history. In folk narratives, the aesthetic values become a site of questioning, resistance, and negotiation. The narrative of Jaomae Nang Norn's legend unveils rural/diaspora confrontations and negotiations with institutionalised frameworks. In this sense, over time, religious and political orders are entangled in a series of discursive practices that aid in evolving and retelling these tales.

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