The Myth of Mae Phosop: The Rice Goddess of Thailand

Worshipping goddesses like Mae Phosop (แม่โพสพ), the rice goddess, has been a part of Thai culture and tradition since prehistoric times. Even though the role of female deities became subservient since the introduction of male-dominated faiths such as Hinduism, Brahmanism and the official religion Buddhism, the power of the matriarchal spirit has always played an important role in Thailand. She is also known as Mae Khwan Khao (แม่ขวัญข้าว), the ‘Mother of Rice Prosperity’.

The rice goddess of Thailand

Thailand ‘s rice goddess. Note that the letters seen on top right are Khmer script (photo credit: devata.org)
Mae Phosop is considered the spirit or soul of rice, that is the main staple of the Thai diet. Thus, it is a common belief that without rice, a person cannot sustain and live long. The myth and legend of the rice goddess says that she is badly mistreated by an old widow. Hence, she flees and finds shelter with a friend. This friend is a fish that leads the goddess into the deep forest where no human being can find and reach her.

As a consequence, all human beings begin to suffer from the absence of Phosop and try all that is humanly possible to find her. Finally, the fish advises the goddess to return to the humans because the next Lord Buddha will soon come to the world. Thus, the blessing of the rice goddess is needed since the Buddha will not be able to fulfil his duty on earth without Mae Phosop. Hence, she comes back to the community of mankind to stay forever. However, before her return, the goddess asks human beings to promise her to treat her with respect forever after. In return she promises to bring
abundant crops to mankind. Man keeps his word and so does Mae Phosop.

A Thai paddy field, abundant crops are vital for mankind (photo credit: Takeaway, wikimedia.org)

This story explains Thai fertility rites concerning the cultivation of rice. Thus, we may be justified in claiming that the relationship between humans and the ‘soul’ of rice is mutually dependent. Hence, there is also a saying that ‘The virtues of rice are 69, while the virtues of the Lord Buddha are only 59’. This proverb speaks for itself and what is more, it also seems to point out the conflict between animistic beliefs and Buddhism. In addition, it reveals an intrinsic connection and relationship between mankind and what sustains its source of life.
A depiction of the Thai Mae Phosop (photo credit: devata.org)

When the spirit of the rice goddess is invoked, the person who performs the rite will address the spirit with sweet, kind and respectful words. The invocation runs as follows:

‘Dear Spirit of Rice, Mother Phosi, Mother Phosop, Mother of the Nine Stars, Mother Chanthewi, Mother Si Dusada, come, please, come’
Mae Phosop is addressed by the title of mother (mae) who provides food for her children (i.e. mankind). Thus, people are her children and they treat her with respect as they would their natural mother. Here is a clip demonstrating how the spirit in invoked. By the way, according to Thai tradition, children are also taught to Wai, i.e. put their hands in the position of obeisance and respect, after finishing their meal.

Summing up, we may say that on the one hand, the myth of the rice goddess in Thailand shows how animistic and Buddhist belief were combined in the past. On the other hand, it also reveals mankind’s dependency on a good rice harvest. Hence, people feel grateful to the rice goddess and behave respectful towards her.

Yours, Sirinya

(Reference: Siraporn Nathalang, Thai Folklore. Insights Into Thai Culture, Chulalongkorn University Press, 2000)