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Bad Death and Malevolent Spirits among the Tai Peoples

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Abstract. – The adoption of Buddhism by some of the Tai-speaking peoples had on their cosmology and soteriology an impact that the present paper considers from the specific point of view of the conceptions relating to abnormal death. It emerges from the comparison between Buddhist and non-Buddhist Tai, that the doctrine of karma had certainly an impact on the interpretation of bad death, but that it has not deeply changed its symptoms as well as the typology of the malevolent ghosts it generates. Despite their wildness, these ghosts may be tamed and become guardian spirits of local communities, under certain conditions which are examined in the last part of the paper. *[Tai, popular religion, Buddhism, malevolent spirits, ancestor worship]*

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The ethnography of the conceptions of death and funeral customs among the Tai-speaking peoples is rich.[1] But it mainly concerns the fate and ritual processing of the "normal" dead, whereas few attention has been paid to "unnatural" death. The relative discretion of the scholars on this topic echoes that of the Tai themselves, motivated in the latter case by popular beliefs which establish a genetic relationship between bad death and the cohort of fearsome spirits haunting the human world.

In two recent publications (Formoso 1996*a*, 1996*b*), I have skimmed the subject over, through the description of the ritual "recycling" by overseas Chinese associations of Thai restless dead in the context of modern Thailand. But the focus was on the meaning of the interethnic cooperation this category of dead arouses, rather than on their nature, status, and manifestations according to Tai beliefs. The present study is an attempt to go deeper into such beliefs. More precisely, it intends to make explicit the criteria which define "unnatural" death, as well as the relationships the spirits thus created entertain both with other spiritual agents (deities, ancestors, tutelar spirits . . .), and with the living.

One can not analyze this aspect of the Tai conceptions without taking into account Theravada Buddhism and its deep impact on the cosmology and soteriology of the populations whose ideas and values it has pervaded (cf. Formoso 1996*c*). Hence the necessity of the following comparison of the upland groups, such as the Black, White, and Red Tai of northern Laos and Vietnam, who greatly stood apart of this influence, with other Tai speakers who, on the contrary, adopted Buddhism many centuries ago, in the context of the Indianization of the lowland societies of western and central Indochina.

Among the Non-Buddhist Tai

The Tai-speaking peoples share the idea that the human person, apart his body, is made up of several spiritual elements, named *khwan*. The number of these *khwan* varies significantly from group to group. For instance, Red Tai have 120 of them (Robert 1941: 38), while Black Tai, according to Maspéro (1971: 269), may count more than 81. The non-Buddhist Tai believe that the physical and spiritual components of the person are shaped by heavenly fathers and mothers (*phi then* and *mae*

1 In this paper, Tai refers to the group of languages spoken by, amongst others, the Shan, Thai, Lao, Lü, Yuan, Black Tai, White Tai, Red Tai, Tho, Chuang, and Chung-Chia. As noted by Terwiel (1979: 393), Tai-speaking peoples are widely distributed over mainland Southeast Asia. They form the dominant groups in Thailand and Laos, but also constitute the most numerous group of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam, and they are well represented in the south of China (provinces of Kweichow, Kwangsi, Yunnan, and Kwangtung). As for the main ethnographic sources about death, see Bonifacy (1904), Maspéro (1929, 1971), Robert (1941), Durand (1952), Lafont (1955), Abhay (1956), Kickert (1960), Tambiah (1970), Zago (1972), Archaimbault (1973), and Terwiel (1979).