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# From filth-ghost to Khmer- witch: *Phi Krasue*'s changing cinematic construction and its symbolism

## ABSTRACT

*Depicted as a floating woman's head with drawn out and bloody entrails dangling beneath it, phi krasue is one of the most iconic uncanny creatures of Thai horror cinema. However, despite its position as one of Thailand's most striking and well-known phi, there is very little research investigating this specific phenomenon. This is remarkable given the commonality of encounters with this uncanny being in 'real life' and the continuous presence of its ghostly images in popular cultural media. Relating empirical data gathered during anthropological fieldwork in a rural community of Thailand's lower north-east to the analysis of two Thai ghost films that take this ghostly image as their main subject and narrative force this article argues that the knowledge of vernacular ghostlore is essential to decipher the cinematic representations' full symbolism. Thai ghost films are produced for the 'knowing spectator' who has implicit knowledge of the cultural logics structuring ghostly classification in contemporary Thailand. This embodied knowledge allows Thai audiences to make sense of phi krasue's ghostly image despite its cinematic transformation from 'Filth Ghost' to 'Khmer Witch'. Based on Kristeva's theory of abjection I will show that Thai audiences continue to see phi krasue first and foremost as uncanny 'matter out of place'.*

## KEYWORDS

*phi krasue*  
Khmer magic  
abjection  
local ghostlore  
demonization  
ambiguity

1. In order to account for the ontological difference between encounters with *phi* in 'real life' and cinematic representations I draw a methodological boundary between 'uncanny beings' and 'ghostly images'. With this distinction I want to emphasize the 'ontological turn' and its relevance for the anthropological study of *phi* and uncanny haunting in Thailand. With the term 'uncanny being' I thus intend to meet the ontologists' demand to take things encountered in the field 'seriously' without reducing them to our modern way of thinking by denying their 'reality' and identifying them as symbols or representations of something else (GDAT 2010: 175, quoted in Ladwig 2011: 22–23). The term 'ghostly image' on the other hand is explicitly designed to talk about the symbolic and representational dimensions of *phi* in popular culture and discourse. Uncanny beings and ghostly images are nevertheless dialectically related and a *phi*'s symbolism and its meaning are therefore contextual. Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the term 'language games' to address the contextuality of meaning, linking meaning making to the practical requirements of a given speech event (Rehbein 2013: 124–27; Wittgenstein 1984).

2. *Phi* is an important but highly relational and contextual cultural concept that cannot be translated unambiguously (Stanlaw and Yoddumnern 1985: 142). It continues to challenge

## INTRODUCTION

*Phi krasue* is a well-known and iconic uncanny being<sup>1</sup> in Thailand and neighbouring countries. The term *krasue* has no direct meaning in Thai and although it sounds Khmer it is probably of Mon origin (Bauer 2011, personal communication). The term *krasue* can refer to the *phi*<sup>2</sup> as well as its human host in the form of *pen krasue* (literally 'to be *krasue*'). In contrast to the closely related uncanny being *phi pop*, *phi krasue* cannot be sent out to cause harm on its owner's behalf, but may harm humans due to its nature. While its local names and some of its characteristics may differ significantly, the most distinguishing features of this *phi* are its voracious appetite for filth, internal organs, corpses or impure bodily substances such as faeces, pus and menstrual blood, as well as its association with malevolent forms of magic. *Phi krasue* is strictly nocturnal and tries to conceal its true nature during the day. Being explicitly female-gendered, it will appear as an old ugly woman, a beautiful young maiden or ordinary village girl.

Driven by an insatiable hunger, *phi krasue* will detach its head and some inner organs from the host's body during the night. While the body remains 'sleeping' in its place of residence, the head hovers through the night with its entrails dangling beneath, a few feet above the ground. In its search for food it then emits a pulsating greenish or reddish glow that can be seen from far away and which will vary according to the *phi*'s mood.<sup>3</sup> Villagers usually compare this light to the glow of fireflies but add that it is much larger, so both lights cannot be confused. The creature avoids encounters with humans and usually feasts on faeces and livestock, especially fowl and other small animals it snatches from rice fields or irrigation ditches. Since it is attracted by foul smells, especially those of bodily secretions, it is nevertheless feared during childbirth, defecation and in cases of sickness.<sup>4</sup> Having found a weak person it will transgress the body's borders and enter it stealthily through one of the excreting orifices to start feasting on some internal organ, or the foetus in the case of pregnant women. The anus thereby represents *phi krasue*'s preferred point of entry and it usually stays within the body until the victim wastes away.

While *phi krasue*'s true origin usually remains unspecified, local ghostlore links its genesis commonly to a breach of taboo associated with sorcery, love magic or witchcraft. It also has a hereditary dimension associated with matrilineity since it is said that a woman who is *krasue* cannot die before she succeeds in spitting her saliva into the mouth of a female relative, who will then become the *phi*'s next host. The transmission also has a contagious dimension as interlocutors stated that malevolent magic can become so powerful that it falls upon relatives of a practitioner like a curse and may thus turn one of them into *phi krasue* (Bastian 1867; Hanks 1963; Irwin 1907; Nueng 2009; Rajadhon 1954; So 2009; Textor 1973).

However, despite its position as one of Thailand's most striking and well-known *phi*, there is very little research investigating this specific phenomenon. This is remarkable given the commonality of encounters with this uncanny being in 'real life' and the continuous presence of its ghostly images in popular cultural media.<sup>5</sup> In light of such absence and given the importance of film as reference points for constructing *phi krasue*'s characteristics in local discourse, this article is a timely investigation into the incarnation of this *phi* in two significant Thai films that have not been discussed in detail yet, both of which take this ghostly image as their main subject and narrative force. The film *Tamnan Krasue* (Bunluerit, 2002) is a contemporary invention of *phi*

*krasue's* origin myth, while *Krasue Sao* (Naowaratch, 1973) is a much earlier film that is arguably the first film to feature *phi krasue* as a major protagonist. The article will explore the relationship between these cinematic representations of *phi krasue* and local ghostlore. Through close analysis it will indicate that cinematically this *phi* has been carefully adapted to function as a demonic abject during a period of social instability and crisis. The cinematic image's abject symbolism nevertheless reproduces the premises of local ghostlore. Knowledge of the logic structuring these vernacular imaginations is thus essential to decipher the meaning of the cinematic adaptations. These include creating an 'origin myth' that attaches the *phi* to the recent demonization of Khmer<sup>6</sup> culture in Thailand and the removal of certain characteristics vernacularly associated with 'filth', which were no longer appropriate in Thailand's push towards modernization.

### **DISTINGUISHING THE CINEMATIC INCARNATION OF *PHI KRASUE* IN *TAMNAN KRASUE* AND *KRASUE SAO***

*Krasue Sao* is first and foremost a love story that portrays an idealized relationship of a Thai couple in rural Thailand of the 1960s. It tells a story of conjugal obligation in which the protagonists stay together irrespective of the many obstacles they encounter and overcome throughout the film. This includes the wife's ghostly transformation into a *phi krasue*, the intervention of a local thug, an evil magician and his attempt to kill the wife, and a girl's love magic resulting in the husband's second marriage, none of which are able to force the couple apart. In the end their marital fidelity and the joint endurance of bad karma subdues the *phi krasue* and frees the female protagonist from her dead grandmother's soul (known as *winyan* in Thai) that was the reason for her ghostly transformation. As the first film featuring *phi krasue*, *Krasue Sao* has had a major impact on the images of *phi krasue* that circulate in local contexts (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> It is notable that given the striking features of *phi krasue*, it is closely related to the depiction in *Tamnán Krasue* despite their almost 30 year separation. *Krasue Sao's* ghostly image thus represents the blueprint for the one featuring in *Tamnán Krasue*.

anthropologists trying to decipher the symbolism of its various manifestations. Following Phya Anuman Rajadon many scholars take *phi* as a generic term that denotes ghosts, demons, devils or evil spirits, which are thus categorically distinguished from more benevolent or neutral spiritual agents (1954: 153). The results of this reductionism are translations of *phi* as either 'ghost' or 'spirit' and sometimes even an unspecified switching between both categories within a single text. Kitiarsa instead uses the well-known term 'ghost' as it 'specifically implies vernacular perceptions of ghostly presence and uncanny haunting' (2011: 203) without implying moral judgments. I follow his lead in this article to identify representations of *phi* in popular media and beyond on the basis of their uncanniness.

3. This description mixes portrayals of *phi krasue's* features found in the literature



Figure 1: *Krasue Sao* bites another, older *phi krasue* in the intestines during a fight.

with oral information I have gathered during thirteen months of anthropological fieldwork in a rural community in Buriram province of Thailand's lower north-east. This article summarizes the argument of a chapter from my upcoming Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Kaleidoscopes of belonging – an ethnography of popular religious rituals and sociocultural reproduction in rural Buriram'. The research project was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

4. This of course has changed with the introduction of bathrooms and the fact that most births take place in hospitals, even in the remotest areas of Thailand. Toilets remain nevertheless the most common spaces where humans may be attacked by *phi krasue* while the rice field represents the usual space to encounter the floating light that is considered uncanny but not regarded as a threat.
5. While outside of Thailand this iconic ghost may be known purely by its filmic incarnations, it is important to remember that *phi krasue*'s existence is not limited to the fictitious and metaphorical realms of film, novel and comic book. It is frequently encountered in 'real life' too. During my fieldwork in Buriram province I interviewed several interlocutors who described their first-hand encounters with an uncanny being they identified as *phi krasue*. *Phi krasue* is indeed a very common phenomenon in Buriram and my empirical data indicate that nearly all villages in the district of my research host this *phi*.

*Tamnan Krasue*, literally 'The Legend of *Krasue*' but released with the English title *Demonic Beauty*, portrays events in thirteenth-century northern Siam. The plot arises from the first recorded revolt of Siamese nobles against their Khmer overlords in the year 1220 (Wyatt 2001: 52–57). The film's protagonist is a young Khmer<sup>8</sup> princess who is sentenced to death but manages to escape her execution with the help of a Khmer witch. Transformed into *phi krasue* through the use of 'black magic' the princess enters the dead body of an innocent Siamese village girl who resembles her like a twin. After more and more villagers have uncanny encounters, the village monk succeeds in defeating *phi krasue* using 'white magic'. Although the *phi* seems destroyed, the film's final scene then reveals that *phi krasue* is the Khmer witch's immortal soul by showing how it possesses the next village girl and turns her into *phi krasue*. The film ends with the words, 'from this moment *phi krasue* was known in Thailand'.

Due to the popularity, frequency and widespread consumption of ghost films in Thailand, such films work together with more traditional or vernacular forms of ghostlore as a major force in shaping the construction and reproduction of ghostly images in Thai everyday life. In Thailand, pictorial imaginations overlap and blend with both media texts and real-life experience. Peter A. Jackson has emphasized the central importance of these social 'images' in Thailand's contemporary popular culture, arguing that such 'images' are always a blending of visual and discursive components (2004: 186). This process of blending is central to understanding the evolution of the ghost images in *Tamnan Krasue* and *Krasue Sao* and their symbolism which, close analysis indicates, are a mixture of discourses from both older folklore and contemporary popular culture.

For instance, during my fieldwork, a typical conversation with villagers about their images of *phi krasue* would usually start with a description of a large ball of light floating around at night looking for filthy foodstuff (known as *khong sok prok* in Thai, a term that usually translates as 'filth' or 'dirt'). A person's transformation into this kind of *phi krasue* would be attributed to breaking taboos associated with magic, sorcery and witchcraft. In folk epistemology the reason for the transformation is as important to conceptualizing *phi krasue* as are its striking visual features. If interlocutors describe the being in any greater detail then they usually begin talking about a floating head with drawn-out intestines and, significantly, it is at this moment that explicit references to cinematic images are usually made. Such a connection demonstrates that this iconic attribute of *phi krasue*'s cinematic incarnation has now been appropriated as an established feature in vernacular descriptions of the uncanny being, indicating the close relationship between such discourses.

While early anthropological sources do mention the detachment of the head in *phi krasue* (Bastian 1867: 276; Rajadhon 1954: 158) and so highlight the connection between the films and older forms of local knowledge, many other features of *phi krasue*'s cinematic ghostly image appear entirely original to its cinematic incarnations. For instance its association with death features prominently in both *Krasue Sao* and *Tamnan Krasue* but is not only significantly absent from local ghostlore and anthropological accounts but runs counter to them. In *Krasue Sao*, the transformation of the female protagonist into *phi krasue* is triggered when she is possessed by her dead grandmother's soul (quite a typical event in traditional ghostlore but associated with other *phi*). Likewise in *Tamnan Krasue* the Khmer witch's soul blends with the Khmer princess and reanimates the dead body of a village girl (an idea

that is not present in any anthropological accounts of *phi krasue*), and thus helps the princess to 'survive'. In comparison to this cinematic association with death, my own empirical material and other anthropological accounts note that vernacular ghostly images locate *phi krasue* firmly within the realm of the living (Bastian 1867; Golomb 1985; Hanks 1963; Irwin 1907; Rajadhon 1954; Textor 1973). *Phi krasue*'s vernacular ghostly image thus displays many characteristics anthropological classics associate with the category 'witch' rather than 'ghost' (i.e. dead), or 'spirit' (i.e. deathless) (Assmann 2010: 168; Mayer 1970: 47–48).<sup>9</sup> Such analysis indicates an evolution of *phi krasue*'s ghostly image as a cinematic construction and its changing symbolism in the contemporary age.

## THE ACCEPTANCE OF *PHI KRASUE*'S IDIOSYNCRATIC ORIGIN MYTH

Overall, *Krasue Sao*'s ghostly image stays rather close to traditional ghostlore and its vernacular ghostly images while *Tamnan Krasue* adds various other features to the cinematic repertoire.<sup>10</sup> Notably this includes situating *phi krasue*'s origin in Angkorian Khmer culture, linking it to Khmer magic, identifying it as a Khmer-witch's soul, and equipping it with vampire-like fangs and an *unalom*<sup>11</sup> on its forehead (Figure 2). Certainly the most important element of *phi krasue*'s depiction in *Tamnan Krasue* is the invented origin myth that identifies Angkorian Khmer culture as the source from whence it came, implying that the being entered Thailand's geo-body (Winichakul 1994) through the immortal soul of a thirteenth-century Khmer witch. Various narrative elements also emphasize and reiterate *phi krasue*'s Khmer-link throughout the film. Most significantly, the Khmer princess (who becomes the witch's first host) is depicted as an *apsara* (Figure 3). Trudy Jacobsen describes an *apsara* as 'a category of female divinity able to change shape at will and move between the celestial and mundane worlds, in Cambodian art and architecture' (2008: 45). *Apsaras* feature prominently in the base-reliefs of Angkor Wat and are an important element of Khmer court dances that had a large influence on classical dance forms in Thailand. *Apsaras* are easily recognizable on the basis of their elaborated head-dresses and have therefore become icons of Khmer culture in contemporary Thailand. Throughout the film the Khmer witch speaks mainly Khmer<sup>12</sup> and it is her practicing of Khmer magic that turns the princess into *phi krasue*. Finally it is also the *unalom* appearing on the hosts' forehead after *phi krasue* has entered their body that strengthens this link, since the *unalom* is also associated with Khmer culture, especially with a traditional Khmer script used in Thailand for writing protective formula that have become en vogue in the booming scene of sacred tattoos.

These explicit links to Khmer culture and identity are completely alien to older cinematic depictions and *Krasue Sao*'s narrative thus features no reference to the category Khmer at all. *Tamnan Krasue* is arguably the first time that *phi krasue*'s cinematic ghostly image is explicitly linked to Khmer magic in Thai popular imagination and, since older anthropological sources also make no mention of its link to Khmer culture or identity, this link seems also unelaborated in Central Thailand during the twentieth century. The significance of this connection is evident in the multiple references made to the Khmer-magic-link of Thai popular culture that has become omnipresent since the Asian Financial Crisis. Khmer has become 'the most commonly mentioned source of mysterious magical power among Buddhist Thais' (Golomb 1985: 209) and since the late 1990s the link between the sociocultural categories 'Khmer' and 'magic'

6. Regarding the category 'Khmer' in Thai one has to keep in mind that it is a relational term that can be used to refer to Khmer speakers in Thailand, the people of Cambodia, as well as the nation state itself.
7. I met several interlocutors who could remember having seen the film at local temple fairs in the 1970s and 1980s.
8. In this article I identify the cultural origin of *phi krasue*'s as 'Khmer', although the film uses the term 'Khom'. Deriving from the old Thai phrase '*Khmer krom*', meaning lowland Khmer (Charnvit 2003), this term is usually used to identify an old Khmer script encountered in a variety of ritual contexts. Although connoted positively in these contexts, 'Khom' remains an ambivalent sociocultural category, surrounded by a mystical aura of antiquity and spiritual potency (Denes 2006: 53). Used in Thai nationalist rhetoric it allows for the identification of Thailand as the true heir of Angkor's cultural heritage (Charnvit 2003; Denes 2006: 124).
9. As long as the concepts 'ghost' and 'spirit' are categorically defined in their relation to death, *phi krasue*'s 'witch-like' features render its analytic classification as either 'ghost' or 'spirit' highly problematic.
10. The audience perception research I conducted with students of Buriram's Technical College indicates that most of *Tamnan Krasue*'s idiosyncratic ghostly features are accepted, regarded as logically coherent and





Figure 2: Phi krasue with vampire-like fangs and the unalom on her forehead.



Figure 3: The Khmer princess in Tamnan Krasue is depicted as an Apsara.

incorporated into local language games.

11. The *unalom* is a conically shaped figure often placed above or around a design in order to can be found in all kinds of popular media, from English- and Thai-language newspapers to Internet blogs, movies, TV soap operas and even popular religious literature. The two categories seem to reinforce each other in these modern discourses, up to a point, where they can be used interchangeably and where the prefix ‘Khmer’ merely qualifies magical practices as aggressive and thus immoral (Baker and Phongpaichit 2008: 10, McDaniel 2011: 35).<sup>13</sup>

However, traditional accounts of *phi krasue* in Buriram province seem to recognize a link to Khmer culture. One of *phi krasue*'s local manifestations is that of an uncanny being known as *thamop*. *Thamop* is a Khmer word used in Cambodia to identify male 'witches' (Chouléan 1986: 46). Rajadhon lists it as a 'Cambodian *phi*' that resembles *phi krasue* and most local interlocutors insist that *thamop* and *phi krasue* are merely terminological variations of a single uncanny being (1954: 163). Nevertheless it is not the existence of *thamop* in local discourse that makes *Tamnan Krasue*'s origin myth acceptable, but the simple fact that it reproduces the essential cultural logic this *phi* embodies: *phi krasue* is doomed to leave its body and eat filth as a punishment for practicing malevolent forms of magic and *Tamnan Krasue*'s origin myth is probable because it reinforces stereotypes associating the category Khmer with magical skills and their particular inclination to practice 'black magic' arts.

Such demonization is a discursive strategy which turns certain cultural elements into threatening and dangerous 'others' and thereby attributes them to an ambiguous symbolic space. Demonization maintains these elements as part of society's cultural memory (Assmann 2010: 175) and so principally turns the sacred of one culture (the Khmer *apsara*) into the horror of another (Thailand's *phi krasue*) and thus enshrines a hierarchical relationship that is achieved by negation and repression in times of crisis (Assmann 2010: 176–177).

The late 1990s saw the beginning of the continuing 'crisis of Thai identity' (Streckfuss: 2012: 315) with an 'immediate concern (indeed anxiety) with maintaining existing bodily boundaries and the purity of bodies' (Taylor 2001: 130). Given the growing recognition and importance of Angkorian Khmer culture for Thailand's own cultural heritage since the Asian Financial Crisis (Denes 2006; Keyes 1995: 147, 2002: 215), *Tamnan Krasue*'s origin myth functions to reconstruct Thai identity and position it as superior to Khmer culture while simultaneously recognizing the latter as its own source of origin, so redrawing the boundaries between both sociocultural identities in a time of crisis. Demonization thus becomes analogical to abjection since both operations explain how something is excluded from a symbolic system and attributed to an ambivalent space beyond its borders yet nevertheless remains constitutive of the original system's identity (Kristeva 1982). Both logical operations redraw and emphasize the symbolic boundaries of a classification system, allowing us to link the categories of *phi krasue* and Khmer structurally.

## PHI KRASUE, FILTH AND ABJECTION

As a cultural concept, *phi krasue* embodies the logical principles necessary to imagine the maintenance, permeability and collapse of symbolic boundaries. It consequently functions as a symbolic object (Kristeva 1982): a means to conceptualize and maintain such symbolic boundaries and the ambiguities surrounding them. Mary Douglas argues that these boundaries exist in socio-symbolic classification systems that are modelled on the human body as their blueprint (1984). Kristeva reproduces Douglas' model in her conceptualization of abjection (1982: 65 ff.). In the metaphor Kristeva uses, the human body extricating itself from its bodily substances symbolizes the relevance of an imaginary border that separates the self from that which threatens it and thereby constitutes it (Creed 1997: 8–9; Kristeva 1982: 3). The existence of objects thus helps humans to conceive of the conceptual boundaries of categories, while at the same time emphasizing the ambivalences surrounding

draw attention to its importance' (Terwiel 2012: 83). The *unalom* usually accompanies 'magic spells' written predominantly in Khom-script.

12. Local interlocutors (themselves Khmer-speaker) identified the Khmer witch's language as one of Thailand's Khmer dialects and not Cambodian Khmer.
13. Douglas' functionalist witchcraft-paradigm grounds the attribution of magical knowledge to a particular out-group in the reproduction of social boundaries and in-group solidarity (Denes 2006, 2012; Douglas 1970). However, what this argument fails to answer is why Khmer has become the most commonly mentioned source of mysterious magical power and not an alternative 'ethnic' category like Lao (Golomb 1985: 112, 209)?

them. The moment things leave their proper classificatory space, transgress a symbolic boundary and enter a new realm they change their meaning and turn into polluting loathsome filth (Douglas 1984: 122).

Arguably, the most notable visual feature of *phi krasue*'s cinematic ghostly image is the detachment of the head and the inverted internal organs. This depiction of drawn out and glowing intestines that dangle beneath a floating head goes far beyond the literal inversion of the normal order of things. At its most basic level, this turning of the inside out is a revelation and exposure of what is usually hidden. It is symbolic of the 'horror within', of those features that lie beneath the body's beautiful surface, beyond the social image and so constitute characteristics that are usually excluded from sight: urine, blood, sperm and excrements (Kristeva 1982: 53). The moment these substances transgress the body's borders they become objects, threatening filth. Such filthiness is no intrinsic quality in itself but is meaningful only in relation to the symbolic boundary that was transgressed. Filth represents an object jettisoned out of an enclosed system, thus constituting a dangerous, marginal space beyond the system's borders (Kristeva 1982: 69).

The symbolism of *phi krasue* is intimately linked to the transgression of socio-symbolic boundaries while also simultaneously reproducing them. *Phi krasue* continuously inhabits ambiguous symbolic spaces located between more clearly defined realms. It is neither dead nor a full human being, its hosts are usually unmarried or widowed women occupying the fringes of society, its inside is turned out, it results from magical practices that mix highly polluting ingredients with sacred knowledge, and it is usually encountered on the outskirts of human communities or in paradigmatically ambiguous spaces (like toilets, rice fields and irrigation ditches). It is thus no coincidence that it is closely associated with the polluting bodily fluids that Kristeva identifies as objects. Although all bodily fluids that transgress the human body's borders theoretically qualify as objects in Kristeva's theory, she identifies excrements and menstrual blood as the two polluting agents that are constitutive for subjective identity formation. The former stands for the danger of identity that comes from without, whereas the latter stands for the danger issuing from within (Kristeva 1982: 71). Comparing the features of Kristeva's theory of abjection with *phi krasue*'s vernacular ghostly image reveals that *phi krasue*'s ghostly body manifests and expresses all the logical operations that Kristeva conceptualizes as abjection. *Phi krasue* thus epitomizes the ambiguity that lies beneath the social body's 'beautiful' (sur)face, things Thai society seek to keep in a private realm beyond the public and official gaze (Jackson 2004: 186–93).

The practicing of amoral *saiyasat* (see a full account of this in the next paragraph) threatens the social body from within while the roaming creature threatens individual bodies with its ability to enter them in a reversed way. *Phi krasue* thus represents the danger of ambiguity that threatens the body from within, as well as from without, and is thus an ideal metaphor to conceptualize the logical operation necessary for symbolic boundary construction and maintenance. Simultaneously *phi krasue* embodies the uncanny potential of intellectual insecurity triggered by the permeability of these boundaries and their possible collapse (Bauman 1991: 56; Freud 1960: 231).

The practice of *saiyasat* is a particularly significant hidden social element embodied by the object *phi krasue*. *Saiyasat* is a Thai cultural concept that tends to be rather poorly subsumed under the Euro-American categories of magic, witchcraft and sorcery (McDaniel 2011: 111). Although widely practiced and highly sought after for various reasons by all kinds of social actors in Thailand,



one rarely encounters interlocutors who would admit to practicing, relying upon or being the customer of a *saiyasat* practitioner. *Phi krasue*'s genesis is notably the result of practicing malevolent forms of *saiyasat* and breaking the taboos that accompany these powerful practices. The frequency of encounters with *phi krasue* both in real life and cinematically are an implicit acknowledgment that *saiyasat* is not only widely practiced in Thailand and morally condemnable but also dangerous (as the taboos accompanying it are irreconcilable with the daily routines of village life and thus easily broken). *Phi krasue*'s ghostly image and its encounters in real life are thus reminders that powerful ritual practices are frequently performed in private realms beneath the official image of Thailand's state-sponsored and rationalized Theravada Buddhism.

The marginal ambiguous space that *phi krasue* both occupies and represents is the space of the abject and as such it represents filth. Vernacular depictions of *phi krasue* abound in accounts of this *phi*'s filthy practices, such as its apparent inclination to devour human faeces (*khi*) or its preference to enter a human host through the anus. The importance of *phi krasue*'s filth symbolism is acknowledged by the anthropologist Robert Textor who identifies the association with filth as *phi krasue*'s most distinguishing feature that then ultimately prompted him to translate *phi krasue* literally as 'Filth Ghost' (1973: 397). *Sok prok*, is the main classifier used to comprehend *phi krasue* locally and the category that is sooner or later encountered in all conversations about the being. It thus becomes an essential cultural concept to unlocking and manifesting *phi krasue*'s symbolism as it is largely a contextual state that depends on the transgression of symbolic boundaries. Kristeva's concept of the abject proves very useful to reflect the broader meaning of the term, since various substances, states or even humans may qualify as *sok prok* as soon as they become 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1984: 36).

Despite the commonality and importance of the Kristevian filth-as-human faeces and filth-as-menstrual blood aspects in anthropological accounts and vernacular discourse however, the cinematic depictions of *phi krasue* in *Krasue Sao* and *Tamnan Krasue* contain only implicit references to defecation and menstruation. Both films omit scenes of *phi krasue* eating human faeces. Instead they stress its inclination for raw meat, carrion and placenta, substances that in certain contexts also qualify as *sok prok* (Figure 4). Despite this, it remains relatively easy to read the detachment of the head with the oozing out of bloody entrails as a grotesque metaphor of menstruation. This filth-as-menstrual blood aspect adds to *phi krasue*'s abject symbolism by being metonymically linked to the impurity of menstruating women and their spiritual potency that threatens male spiritual supremacy in folk epistemology. This aspect is explicitly elaborated in *Tamnan Krasue* when the village girl beats up a young man who tried to rape her after her ghostly transformation and when the Khmer witch's magic is portrayed as being more powerful than the magic of a Siamese magician. Likewise in *Krasue Sao* there is a moment where a male *phi* is sent out to kill the female protagonist but flees in terror as soon as he recognizes her as the host of *phi krasue*. Such depictions reinforce *phi krasue*'s connection to the spiritual 'potency' of women in the private and 'hidden' realms of Thai popular religion via its filth-as-menstrual blood symbolism. However, the motif of the detachable head also expresses women's penetrability by verifying the weakness of the female body's boundaries. Such permeability renders the body 'soft' in folk epistemology, so characterizing it as female in the first place (Irvine 1982: 111; Tanabe 1991: 190).<sup>14</sup> This fluctuation between potency and weakness adds to *phi krasue*'s overall ambiguity.

14. The frequently encountered pairing of *phi krasue* with *phi krahang* as its male equivalent is thus problematic since, despite their similar sounding designation, their ghostly images do not share much symbolism. The gender ideology of twentieth-century Thai society seems nevertheless to have strengthened the link, which makes their contemporary pairing commonsensical.

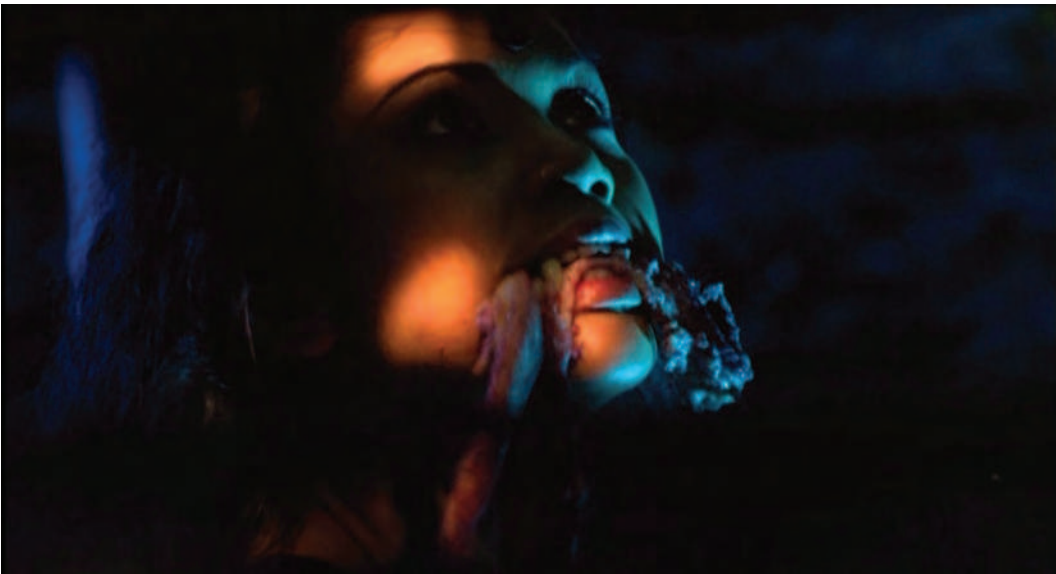


Figure 4: Phi krasue in Tamnan Krasue snatching a placenta.

However, the omission of the filth-as-human-faeces aspect is surprising in *Krasue Sao*. Anthropologist Jane Hanks states that Central Thai villagers in the 1960s felt no revulsion towards faeces nor held ideas of it as filthy or contaminating (1963: 34). Likewise, the common pictures of murder or accident victims in daily newspapers suggest that Thai visual culture usually has no problem with explicit content, suggesting that the omission of the filth aspect in the form of showing a pretty young woman eating human faeces is indicative of wider issues in Thai society (Jackson 2004: 191). The absence of such a staple characteristic in *Krasue Sao* and the classification of human faeces as *sok prok* in contemporary Thailand are probably due to lasting effects from the official attempts to reshape Thai culture starting in the late nineteenth century by Thailand's modernizing elites who attempted deliberately to become members of the 'Victorian ecumene' (Peleggi 2002: 15). Thai elites' continuing effort to present an image of Thailand that was pleasing to the 'gaze' of westerners explains why the 'politics of defecation' were a central factor in King Chulalongkorn's attempts to craft the image of the modern Siamese subject. Chitrabongs' account of King Chulalongkorn's sanitary reforms identifies attempts to ban human faeces from sight in order to establish an image of Bangkok as a modern metropolis, without caring much about his subjects' habits of personal hygiene:

In essence it had nothing to do with hygiene per se. It was, rather, an attempt to prohibit things that ought not to be seen. [...] For King Rama V, untreated sewage was 'matter out of place' and people defecating along canals were eyesores even if he did not actually see them.

(2011: 178)

The attempts to transform Siamese excretory habits continued in the early twentieth century and intensified when the concept of cleanliness entered

primary school textbooks and foul smells became connected to health anxieties (Chitrabongs 2011: 190). Human faeces thus became abject and an essential feature to conceptualize the modern Siamese subject and its body's borders. Any explicit reference to the filth-as-human faeces symbolism of *phi krasue*'s vernacular ghostly images would thus have been a violation of the 'regime of images' marking the era of *Krasue Sao*'s production (Jackson 2004).

In the case of *Tamnan Krasue* the situation is slightly different since it was released much later, in a time marked by a 'Zeitgeist' identified as the 'fading allure of the West' (Jackson 2010: 204). The absence of the filth-as-human faeces aspect in *Tamnan Krasue* may thus be explained with reference to both ghostly images' intertextuality (Goodnow 2010: 13–17) – here referring to the established features of its cinematic ghostly image that did not entail the filth-as-human faeces aspect – and the predominance of certain contemporary narrative trends. The only reference to the idea of *phi krasue* eating human faeces in *Tamnan Krasue* is a scene when the village drunkard defecates in the jungle and something bites him in his behind. He instantly starts crying and begs *phi krasue* for mercy. As he opens his eyes he discovers however that he was bitten by a piglet eating his faeces. This attempt to ridicule the filth-as-human faeces aspect also features in the horror comedy *Saranae Siblor* (Wetchakam, 2010) where three men tell one another ghost stories and the one who starts his story with the reference to a *phi* eating human faeces is scolded by the others for designing a ghostly image that is ridiculous rather than scary.

These comedic references to the idea of *phi krasue* as the 'Filth Ghost' illustrate that both *Tamnan Krasue* and *Saranae Siblor* privilege 'the knowing spectator' (Ingawanij 2006: 155), since only the knowledge of *phi krasue*'s appetite for filth-as-human faeces would enable the audience to understand the irony in these scenes. This construction of *phi krasue* is therefore aimed at an audience who has knowledge of both the logic structuring ghostly classification in Thailand and of *phi krasue*'s special place within this. The viewer must be aware not only of the relation between the various films that depict this being, but also of the specific qualities that link this depiction with local discourse and imagination.

## CONCLUSION

In an analysis of Thai ghost films, one has to keep in mind that these films are produced for and thus privilege 'the knowing spectator'. This viewer has not only an embodied knowledge of ghostly classification but also of the given sociocultural context and so is able to adjust their interpretations to the practical requirements of a given situation. Ghostly classification in Thailand is not only based upon the visual features of a ghostly image but also on the cultural logic that a certain *phi* manifests. This article has offered an analysis of two examples of *phi krasue*'s ghostly image as a means to identify the differences and similarities in local ghostlore and cinematic depictions at different periods throughout the twentieth century. It has tried to address and explore why certain features of this *phi* are represented in these films while others are omitted.

The findings indicate that in order to understand the construction of the *phi krasue* in these films, one must relate the cinematic features of the being to the logic behind the local vernacular imaginations. The cultural concept of *phi krasue* is predominantly concerned with the simultaneous undermining and reproduction of symbolic boundaries and the ambiguities of marginal spaces.

It is the ambivalent position between humans and ghosts that turns hosts of *phi krasue* into paradigmatic objects that occupy an ambivalent symbolic position at the fringe of the social body, threatening its borders with their ability to enter human society during the day and fellow humans during the night, where they feast on human faeces as a punishment for the amoral ritual practices they have engaged in. As such it is the logic of abjection and the resulting association with filth that remains the key to unlock *phi krasue's* symbolism and continues to identify it as uncanny matter out of place.

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