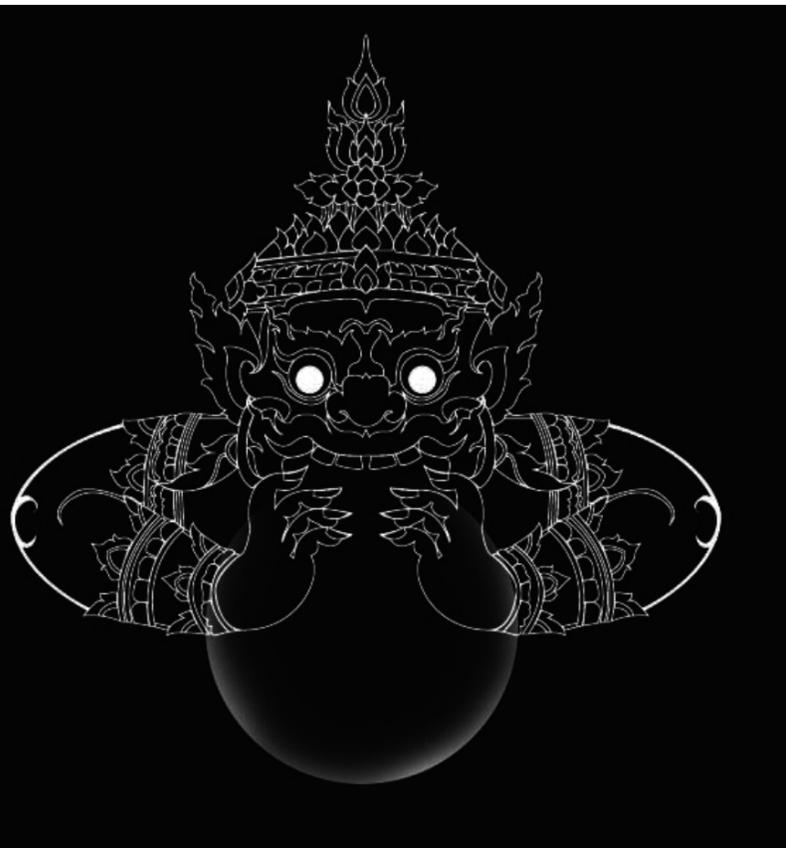


BIZARRE THAILAND

In his new book of nonfiction short stories, *Bizarre Thailand*, Jim Algie explores tales of crime, sex and black magic in Thailand.

The Black Sex Magician of the Body Politic



Rahu

Back in September 1995, headlines on the front page of *The Nation* in Bangkok cast a spell over readers: 'Novice Faces Action After Bizarre Baby-Burning Rite'; 'Defrocked Novice Vows To Carry On With Black Magic'.

The man in question was a Buddhist monk known as Nen (a novice monk) Aer, and this black-magic ritual made him Thailand's most notorious practitioner of the occult. For the right price, he dispensed curses, sex charms and blessings for the hoi polloi and the elite.

An orphan who grew up in a temple in Saraburi province, Nen Aer first became a household curse after an article appeared shortly before that—complete with gruesome photos—in the Thai weekly magazine *Cheewit Tong Su* ('Life's A Fight'), which showed him performing a series of rituals to grill and preserve a stillborn baby in order to transform it into a magical charm. He admitted to purchasing the baby from a mother for 100,000 baht, not long after the infant had passed away.

According to the magazine, Nen Aer (whose real name is Harn Raksajit) had preserved the corpse in a special potion of chemicals and 'holy water'. Afterwards, he and several other monks recited incantations over the dead baby for nine days at Wat Nong Rakam, a temple in Saraburi province. Then they collected the 'drippings' from the corpse to concoct love potions and produce a powerful 'baby ghost'.

None of these rituals had anything to do with Buddhism, which is why he was defrocked even though he denied that it was the clergy who made him give up his robes. Thirty-five years old at the time of his first arrest, the self-proclaimed sorcerer, whose body and face are covered with magical tattoos, told *The Nation*, "It was my own decision to be defrocked for the sake of Buddhism. Nobody forced me. My practice has tarnished Buddhism and I would like other monks and novices who follow such practises to be defrocked, too." But at the same time, he vowed to continue "performing occult rituals to the best of my ability".

Later in 1995, when I was still working at *The Nation*, a Thai colleague informed me that Nen Aer was in the building for a press conference. We walked over to take a look. He was dressed up like an American gangster (or a jazz musician) from the 1940s, in a black suit, fedora and shades. During the press conference, he compared himself to Khun Paen, one of the two friends and main characters in the fabled Siamese folktale *Khun Chang, Khun Paen*, of which there are many different versions. Like the defrocked Nen Aer, Khun Paen also studied the black arts at a temple when he was a child—a common practice in ancient Siam during the wars with the Khmer and the Burmese when the occult was used as a weapon in the military's arsenal. One of Khun Paen's wives dies in the story while pregnant, so he removes the foetus and 'grills' it to make a powerful baby ghost called a *khuman tong* which can supposedly control people's minds. An effigy of this ghost, in the form of a young boy, is still worshipped on some Thai altars.

To the shock of many journalists at the press conference, Nen Aer announced that he'd been offered two million baht to play the lead role in a film based on his life. Shooting for the film had already begun—deliberately scheduled for the day of a total solar eclipse. Such eclipses are marked by the more superstitious Thais with firecrackers, the banging of drums and pots and pans, and even gunshots as they try to frighten Rahu, the Hindu God of Darkness (often portrayed in



Illustration by Ben Hopkins

India riding a chariot pulled by eight black horses), into regurgitating the sun he is swallowing.

The movie, Nen Aer said, would portray him in a positive light as a practitioner of white or 'sympathetic' magic, which can supposedly ease suffering and cure illnesses. The film would also trace his early studies of mysticism at a temple in Cambodia from the age of nine. The Khmer can be counted amongst sorcery's true believers. Their occultists are among the most respected and feared in Southeast Asia. Many Thai men sport magical, protective tattoos with Khmer script. 'Smoke children' are the Cambodian equivalent of the *khuman thong* and are created in much the same way. Such ritualistic practises have been attributed to the ancient Angkoreans and the more recent Khmer Rouge; documented cases still occur today among the country's backwoods folk.

Fielding a question about what the selling points of the film were, Nen Aer gave a cold-blooded laugh. "The

tattoos all over my body, the grilling of children and my background." With the sunglasses on, it was hard to tell if he was practicing his acting by trying on the villain's part, or if he was genuinely villainous. An outcry from the general public and the Federation of the National Film Association of Thailand ensured that the film was later canned. Eventually, Nen Aer was sentenced to six months in jail for damaging a corpse and failing to report a death. He was also prohibited from practicing any form of black magic for five years.

During the press conference, however, the witch doctor boasted that three political parties had already asked him to run as a candidate—not far-fetched in a country where politicians are known to dare their rivals, during parliamentary debates, to swear an oath on the revered Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace. If either of them is lying, the spirits are supposed to put a curse on them. This is also a fairly common way for

Thais to settle disputes of honour or insinuations of thievery. Politicians, too, curry favour, seek blessings and try to appease deities and spirits. Even the more progressive Democrat Party has a logo depicting the earth goddess, *Mae Toranee*, wringing out her



hair in order to drown the minions of the Buddhist devil. Amulets bearing images of Khun Paen on one side and the 'golden child' on the other are easy enough to find, particularly around more superstitious areas like the Khmer-style temple of Wat Khao Phnom Ruang in Buri Ram province, where souvenir stands sell them for as little as 60 baht.

In 2002, Thailand's then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister lit the main candles to commence a ceremony in homage to the God of Darkness at the Srisathong Temple in Nakhon Nayok province. The famous fortune-teller Attaviroj Sritula said the pair became believers after Thaksin barely escaped death on a Bangkok runway the previous year. "The plane exploded [on the runway] before he got on board because *Rahu* protected him." At the time, the prime minister was supposed to fly to Chiang Mai to cut the ribbon for a re-launch of a shopping mall managed by his sister Yaowaret, who had asked Rahu to watch over the place. Unlike in India, Rahu is an auspicious deity in Thailand.

An astrology buff, Thaksin refused to speak with the press for weeks towards the end of 2005 because Mars was not in a favourable position for him, he said. Only a few months later, after a series of financial scandals and a laughable reality TV show about



poverty eradication, the premier found himself bogged down in a political quagmire. Battling against the People's Alliance for Democracy, and an ever-growing number of protestors clamouring for his resignation, he once again resorted to the occult. In the northeastern province of Surin (famous for its tuskers and Khmer influence), Thaksin rode an elephant to strengthen his tenuous grip on power, and performed the same ancient rite as Siamese soldiers once did before a big battle: walking under an elephant's belly to absorb some of its might. When he was given a magical elephant prod with which to scare away his enemies, he told the press, "I will use this prod, along with spells and

talismans, to control the fierce opponents who are trying to oust me."

At the same time, his political foes tried to use black magic against him. A senator from Buri Ram province named Karun Saingam advised the hordes of female protestors in Bangkok to hold photos of the premier, or pieces of paper inscribed with his name, against their crotches while cursing him three times. Whether such rituals have any power or are mere mumbo-jumbo, the prime minister stepped down in April 2006 after winning an election that all the major opposition parties boycotted. An election that cost taxpayers two billion baht, with no opposition, in which the winning party still ended

up losing? Since logic only makes a rare cameo in the tragic farce that is Thai politics, why couldn't a black magician become a premier politico?

Although he boasted about having many big-name politicians as clients, Nen Aer's threat to run for political office back in 1995 never left the starting blocks. For the next few years, I only heard a few anecdotes about him. A female colleague at *The Nation* told me that she'd seen him on a chat show, along with his new bride, and that he appeared to be trying to whitewash his tarnished image. Where else in the world would a practitioner of the black arts and 'serial baby-griller' become a chat-show celebrity? Even sensationalistic American programmes that air shows such as *Single Moms on Crack* would have found that objectionable.

Not long after the five-year ban on him practicing the black arts expired, Canadian photographer Steve Sandford caught up with the sorcerer at his home in Saraburi province.

Did Steve find him particularly evil?

"Criminally evil, cagey... he had a bodyguard in the next room and a kick-boxing ring outside the house. He showed us some of his human skulls—not a real nice guy—and he was braggin' about the photo on his wall of him and the politician Snoh Tienthong."

The black magician showed him some vials of what he claimed were a love potion made from melting the chin fat of corpses. ("It's not like basting a turkey for Thanksgiving," said Steve, laughing.) These vials, known as *nam man phrai*, sell for up to 10,000 baht, because one drop of the potion on someone's skin is said to have enough power to make that person fall in love with whoever put it there.

Nen Aer told Steve that he had 'grilled' a thousand babies, having stolen some of them from cemeteries. The shrunken and mummified corpses could then fit into a trouser pocket or purse. Unless the owner appeased them with soft drinks and sweets, the spirit of the *khuman thong* ('golden



Golden child 'khuman thong'



child') could wreak havoc on them, bouncing up and down on their beds at night until they went mad.

To show off his purported power, the former novice dripped wax from several candles on his tongue (a classic trick amongst Thai spirit mediums and sex-show performers) and jabbed himself with a long sword to show that it didn't draw blood. The sorcerer warned Steve not to write anything bad about him as he poked coffin nails into the eyes of a tiny voodoo doll. One of the skulls in his home, he claimed, was that of a foreign journalist who had dared to betray Nen Aer's Khmer mentor in the black arts.

Some four years later in July 2005, Nen Aer darkened the pages of the local press once again, after 100 cops encircled his huge compound in Saraburi province to snare him in a dragnet. The police had received a multitude of complaints from women that the magician had violated them sexually while performing esoteric rituals designed to increase their powers of attraction and seduction. According to his conquests, Nen Aer had thousands of female customers. The police also uncovered a stash of videotapes showing him engaged in carnal relations with some of his female clients.



Nen Aer



Kamronwit Thoopkrajang, the commander of the Crime Against Children, Juveniles and Women Division (who led the raid along with Paveena Hongsakula, a long-time crusader for the rights of women and children), said these video recordings were used to blackmail the women, and that when the police burst into his house, they found the sorcerer in bed with a 19-year-old bargirl from Bangkok. In the room where he conducted his sex magic rituals, the cops confiscated boxes of condoms, Viagra, firearms, 'love potions' and lingerie. Among other items seized at the large compound—which, in addition to the boxing ring, also included a cock-fighting pit—were a new Mercedes-Benz and passbooks for different banks containing almost ten million baht. Police said that Aer scared up business by promoting his supernatural services in many popular Thai publications. For anywhere from 1,000 to 10,000 baht, he could allegedly mend severed relationships with his brand of hocus-pocus. Some of his female customers claimed they had been raped, but most said they were shafted by a charlatan whose only 'magic wand' in working order was possessed by Viagra, not spirits.

Facing up to five years behind bars and the confiscation of his assets on charges of public deceit—an offense under the Money Laundering



Illustration by Ben Hopkins



Act—the trickster pulled his greatest sleight-of-hand yet, disappearing into the twilight zone after losing some of his assets and serving a brief jail term, from which he recently reappeared.

During the political tumult of 2010 that left at least 90 people dead on the streets of Bangkok, the red-shirted protestors resorted to an ancient, supposedly Brahmin ritual, painting the gates of the parliament buildings and the premier's house with buckets of their blood to put a curse on the government that would force them to resign. But the head of Thailand's royal Brahmin priests complained that these rituals were a blasphemous travesty. "We don't use blood in real Brahmin rites and our rites are designed to promote happiness at different stages of life, like at

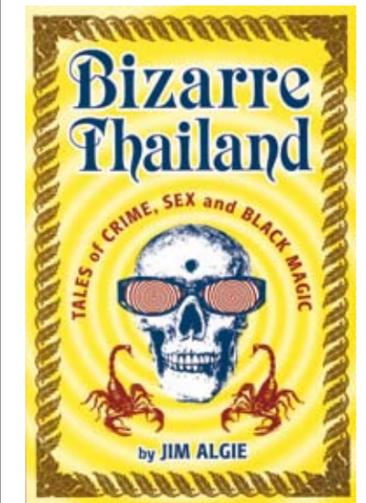
weddings, blessing a newborn, or going to live in a new house," said Phra Ratchakru Wamadhepmuni. "If they want to donate blood, they should give it to those who really need it." Deputy Prime Minister, and the head of national security, Suthep Thangsuban, also condemned the bloodletting. "The world sees some people in Thailand as believers in black magic and as uncivilised." To counter the witchcraft, the government invited religious leaders from the Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and Sikh communities to perform blessing ceremonies in front of the government building.

In several of the photos published in the local press during the protests, a shadowy figure with tattoos on his face appears off to one side. Was the black magician serving as an occult

advisor to the red shirts, or making good on his promise to enter the political fray?

As in the days of ancient Siam warring with the Khmer and the Burmese, and during the time of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra praying to Rahu and practicing occult rituals to strengthen his tenuous grip on power, the country's body politic remains paralysed by a centuries-old nerve centre of patronage, nepotism and superstition. As Nen Aer once said when he first threatened to run for political office, "All politicians are like magicians. They cast a spell on you, promise all sorts of miracles, and then people will believe anything they say. There's no more blood on my hands than there is on any politician's."

For the black magician and all the heavyweight politicians he has advised, power, money and sex continue putting curses on policy-making and democratic reforms.



Bizarre Thailand: Tales of Crime, Sex and Black Magic
By Jim Algie
ISBN: 9789814302814
Published by Marshall Cavendish
Bt 595

For more info and updates, browse BizarreThailand.com