



Symposium: Lived Karma

Sociokarma and Kindred Spirits: An Acknowledgement

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Jonathan S. Walters' sevenfold sociokarma typology considers only two broad categories of karma: that of an individual agent or that of an institution or social group. This brief study reframes Walters' sociokarma away from agent-centered myopia to relation-centered analysis. With illustrations from the contemporary Thai religious landscape, we can observe how various forms of relational karma intuitively account for spirits and material objects as a given. In other words, "collective karma" must also address entanglements; Entanglements of not only individual agents, be they persons or institutions, but also of ancestors, ghosts, deities, and various material culture—an agency of relations. Hence, ultimately, this note calls for the acknowledgement of spirits and "stuff" as inclusive in conceptions of collective karma.

Keywords: karma; sociokarma; collective karma; spirits; Thailand

Jonathan S. Walters' sevenfold sociokarma typology considers only two broad categories of karma: that of an individual agent (types one through five) or that of an institution or social group (types six and seven). This critical note reframes Walters' sociokarma away from agent-centered myopia to relation-centered analysis. With illustrations from the contemporary Thai religious landscape, we can observe how various forms of relational karma intuitively account for spirits and material objects as a given—an agency of relations. Thai individuals, social groups and institutions can rationalize their actions for cultivating certain kinds of relations with spirits (ancestors, ghosts, angels), Buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Guānyīn, or material culture (Buddha statues, amulets, sacred bracelets) as an ongoing need (or option) in their everyday interactions.

It is the relations themselves that we must consider as collective. In other words, "collective karma" must also address entanglements—entanglements of not only individual agents, be they persons or institutions, but also of ancestors, ghosts, deities, and various forms of material culture. Ultimately, this brief study encourages scholars to not only recognize but also consider weaving into their analyses the often overlooked yet omnipresent influence and entanglement of spirits and "stuff." Hence, rather than a critical "note," I call this a critical "acknowledgement." Given limitations on space, this note will highlight examples of relational agency with spirits, not material objects.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "kindred" as either a noun, referring to one's family and relations, or an adjective, describing something that is "similar in kind" or "related." In a similar vein, the nominal phrase "kindred spirit" specifies "a person whose interests or attitudes are similar to one's own." I use the phrase "kindred spirit" to reflect both literal and figurative examples in Thailand. The former refers to kin, while the latter to mutual interests. For literal kin(dred) spirits, in addition to one's ancestors or deceased family members, I include in this category lovers, close friends, neighbors, or colleagues, both living and deceased. Kindred spirits, in the figurative sense, describes spirits with whom one does not have relations, namely, those



of strangers. It can also include territorial spirits, such as spirits of a body of water, land, or buildings, as well as spirits of the Thai religious pantheon, such as angels (*tewada*, เทวดา), Buddhist deities like Indra or Guānyīn (觀音; 관음; Thai: *chaomaeguanim*, เจ้าแม่กวนอิม), or prominent historical kings, especially King Chulalongkorn (Rāma V) or the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rāma IX). Even though one does not have relations with spirits of this latter category, as one would have with literal kin, one can establish a relationship through mutual interests, typically expressed as a transactional connection.

Kindred Spirits: Literal

The phrase “instant karma” exists in the Thai language (literally: *gamdamtan*, กรรมตามทัน) but it is not frequently used. What we English speakers mean by “instant karma” is expressed, in one way, in Thai as *somnamna* (สมน้ำหน้า), meaning “serves you right.” There are several other Thai phrases that describe karmic actions or connections. As Ritzinger noted in his piece, karmic connections can be attributed when there is a feeling of intimate familiarity. The most positive of such a connection in Thai is *nuakhu* (เนื้อคู่), translated as soulmate. This is the colloquial term. Among astrologers, a specific, and more literal, term is used: *khu-nai-aditchat* (คู่ในอดีตชาติ), meaning a couple that was together in a past life. This is the most positive outcome for two individuals who, in a past life, aspired to be reborn together. This is a common belief and practice among Theravādin Buddhists, Walters’ “sociokarmic aspiration” (Walters 2003: 23). Following a love soulmate, the next best rebirth outcomes could result in an intimate friendship, best friends, or perhaps as one’s own child or other kin. A human rebirth is the highest rebirth, contingent on sufficient accumulative positive karma. In the case that a karmic connection is not reborn as a human being but instead as one’s pet, the common expression used is *bun-maiteung* (บุญไม่ถึง). *Bun*, meaning merit, is the Thai transliteration of the Pāli for *puñña* (Sanskrit: *puṇya*). Literally, the phrase illustrates that their (the pet’s) merit failed to reach [transmigration as a human]. Apart from these two terms for soulmate (*nuakhu* and *khu-nai-aditchat*), however, most karmic phrases in Thai commonly refer to challenging relationships.

In Thai there is such a concept as a negative soulmate, or perhaps more aptly identified as a “toxic mate.” Each member of such a couple is divinely drawn to one another, like those of a soulmate coupling; however, their interaction is mostly toxic. They fight constantly. They might engage in abusive behaviors, whether emotional or physical. They might even break up, but only temporarily, of course, because despite their toxic coupling, they cannot live without one another. They remain together. This type of couple is referred to as, *khuwen-khugam* (คู่เวรคู่กรรม). Neighbors and passersby who overhear disputes or witness harmful actions of such a couple rarely report incidents to the neighborhood police. Even if such a report is made, the local authorities are typically not responsive, as it is considered a domestic matter between husband and wife or the unmarried couple. It would be disregarded simply as matters that must be worked out *only* between that toxic-mate couple. Deconstructing the term “toxic mate” can help us understand the cosmological philosophy behind the cultural reluctance of outsiders’ to get involved. *Gam* is the Thai transliteration of the Pāli for *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*). *Khu* refers to couple. *Khugam*, thus, is a couple drawn together karmically. The toxic nature of the phrase is reflected in the second syllable, *wen*, which is defined as fate, particularly negative, as in misfortune, retribution, or revenge. Hence, *khuwen-khugam* is a couple who, despite their toxic relationship, cannot live without one another because they cannot be karmically freed from one another until their “karmic debts,” so-to-speak, have been paid off. Once such a toxic-mate relationship has finally ended (divorce or a final break up), the karmic debt may be considered paid. Each party of the dissolved relationship can be assured, then, that they would not be bound to each other under such toxic conditions again, that is, if they meet at all in a future life.

The term *wen* also appears in another common Thai phrase regarding karmic connections, *chaogam-naiwen* (เจ้ากรรมนายเวร). Recall that *gam* is karma. *Chao* and *nai* are synonyms that describe a leader. *Chao* is the highest term, hierarchically, and is employed in the Thai language as an honorific prefix denoting royalty or sacrality. It can refer to gods or monarchy. In contrast, *nai* is a mundane term used to address one's employer or boss.¹ Altogether, then, *chaogam-naiwen* implies that our past karma rules over our lives. The toxic-mate relationship (whether a love relationship or a friendship) is a common situation in which the phrase *chaogam-naiwen* is used. And it is often suggested as the reason behind one's suffering through a negative streak—a series of misfortunate events, continually fails school examinations, is unsuccessful in landing a job after dozens of interviews, or constantly encounters difficult interpersonal interactions. Astrologers, monks, temple staff and community elders also blame *chaogam-naiwen* for the misfortunes of a woman who had an abortion. The spirit of the aborted fetus is recognized as the *chao*, the boss, who rules, from the afterlife, over the woman's life. The sorrow, anger, confusion, and overall tantrums of the aborted fetus is the *wen*, the retribution and revenge, that manifests as misfortune in the woman's life. Women who seek counsel from temple monks or who are clients of astrologers are advised to make merit (*tambun*, ทำบุญ), recite certain chants, or perform particular rituals to appease the spirit of the aborted fetus if she aspires to better her life. A similar practice is found in Japan, known as *mizuko kuyō* (水子供養), or water child ritual.² The term *mizuko*, however, is not reserved only for aborted fetuses. Stillborn and miscarried children are also considered “water children” whose spirits are in equal need of appeasement. In the Thai cultural context, it is also the case that stillborn and miscarried children are equally attended to when reconciling with one's *chaogam-naiwen*.

Kindred Spirits: Figurative

Figurative kindred spirits include all other spirits that are not “literal” kin (recall that lovers, friends, and colleagues are considered “kin” here). While relationships with literal kin spirits are established through past karmic connections, figurative kindred spirits are likely new ties. The karmic connection for figurative kindred spirits are established, instead, through a type of transactional bond. There are two main types that I outline below. The first can be colloquially termed, “Bluetooth bond.” The second is known as a “vow offering.”

The Bluetooth bond describes the transactional bond between a person and a spirit who “connects” with the person based on mutual interest. The mutual interest is made known to spirits typically through chanting or a verbal announcement to transfer or share one's merit. Spirits passing by who hear the announcement and take up the offer may now be considered “karmically” connected to the person. This is especially the case if the person chants a protective chant (Pāli: *paritta*) intended to ward off evil spirits, dangers or misfortune. In this case, it is perhaps more apt to recognize the connection not through mutual interest but rather symbiotic interest, whereby the chanter receives protection from the spirit and the spirit in return receives merit shared by the person.

In an interview with a reputable astrologer, or *modu* (หมอดู),³ I learned that it is the spirits, not necessarily the chant itself, that protect people. He said the same of amulets, rejecting the popular belief that amulets themselves are the source of protective power. It is a myth, he said. When we wear an amulet *and* when we vocalize our intentions to share merit, passerby spirits who wish to take up the offer will then “connect” with us karmically through the amulet. Sometimes, even without hearing our verbalized intention or chanting, a spirit can choose to connect simply because of a shared interest in our amulet of choice or the aesthetic appeal

¹ Colloquially, it is used to politely address a man as “mister,” e.g., *Nai* Jonathan Walters, Mr. Jonathan Walters.

² See Hardacre (1999), LaFleur (1992), and Wilson (2009).

³ The astrologer has a hole-in-the-wall shop located behind Bangkok's Asia Hotel. Pantip.com, a Thai forum equivalent to Reddit.com, show posts testifying to the accuracy of this astrologer's predictions, some even written by skeptics.

of the amulet. Whatever the reason for the attraction, the *modu* theorized that the connection—between spirit and amulet—parallels that of Bluetooth technology. The amulet is like one electric device (cell phone, tablet, laptop) that wirelessly connects to another electronic device (earphones, external speaker, keyboard), considered the spirit. A successful Bluetooth connection, or the pairing of two devices, can only occur through WiFi and in short range. Likewise, a Bluetooth bond can only work when a spirit is nearby or within earshot of a person. While such a connection can happen between strangers, or figurative kindred spirits, the connection can sometimes happen with kin or ancestor spirits. Kin and ancestor spirits are always surrounding us, though, so it is less likely that they resort to a Bluetooth bond to connect with us. In more special cases, added the *modu*, a Bluetooth bond can be established with higher powers of the Thai religious pantheon. This includes angels, deities, or bodhisattvas.

The second type of transactional bond that connects us with figurative kindred spirits is known as a vow offering, *khupon-gaebon* (ขอพรกับตน).⁴ *khupon* is to make a request, to plead, with a deity, bodhisattva, with the spirits of a deceased king, hero, heroine, prominent figure, with spirits of a territory, or even with a sacred site. One makes a wish (e.g., to pass college entrance examinations, land a lucrative job, or have a child).⁵ In return, one makes specific offerings to the deity or spirit. Once the wish is granted, one should return to where the request was first made—the temple, a deity's shrine, sacred site—in order to *gaebon*, or fulfill one's vow.⁶ Hollywood celebrity Chrissy Teigen, who is half Thai, performed *khupon-gaebon* to ask for her second child. In November 2017, she hosted an Instagram live stream. During the session, Teigen happily announced that she was pregnant. Knowing that Teigen experienced several miscarriages and ultimately conceived her first child by IVF, her followers inquired about the nature of Teigen's second pregnancy. The public speculated that she likely conceived again using IVF. But instead of focusing on IVF, Teigen discussed alternative methods, unfamiliar to the American public. Teigen's Thai mother, nicknamed Pepper, joined the livestream to share that, since their prayers were answered, they must return to the local Thai temple in Los Angeles to offer a banana, and thus fulfill their vow, the *gaebon*. The banana offering comes only after a successful conception, following their first offering of 99 eggs. This offering of eggs and banana is a common *khupon-gaebon* transaction in Thailand for those who wish to conceive.

Conclusion

This critical note, outlining the various karmic relationships among spirits and associated rituals, is a preliminary survey based on a few sources and my ethnographic observations over the past decade. Though preliminary, it is a small step in responding to the scholarly foci of the field of Buddhist Studies, in general, and of Theravāda Buddhism in particular, which has privileged the study of manuscripts (mostly canonical), monks (and/or monasteries, especially royal), and meditation (particularly mindfulness). I dub these research foci the “three Ms.” Studies based on the three Ms are, no doubt, foundational for Buddhist Studies. But it remains a partial picture inherited by past orientalist research agenda and thereby overlooks what 99% of Buddhists *do and care about*. One way to overcome the limitations of triple-M research is to examine the role of spirits in the daily lives of practitioners. John Holt is one scholar of Theravāda Buddhism who has seriously attended to spirits in his work. Likewise, my research agenda to highlight Buddhist spirits and “stuff” (or everyday material culture) is one of many potential contributions that aim to diversify the study of Buddhism. Spirits are entangled in everyday Thai religiosity. Expanding the understanding of collective, from summation of individual entities to a summation of relations means that we must also consider who we count as “individual” among these relations—not just those who are physically here.

⁴ Kelly Meister Brawn calls this “pact-making” (Kaloyanides et al. 2021: 587).

⁵ Prayers are usually directed to *chaomaeguanim* (Chinese: Guānyīn), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is known to assist with fertility.

⁶ Whittaker (2015: 82) calls *gaebon* “redeeming a vow.”

Allow me to return to the example of *khopon-gaebon* for one final analysis. The second clause of the phrase, *gaebon*, is key to understanding this transactional bond. Fulfilling one's vow is *the* crucial step to ensure efficacy of any *khopon-gaebon*. A quick Google search in Thai for the word *gaebon* renders a list of results illustrating various *khopon-gaebon*. Noteworthy for our interests is the fact that the entire first page of generated results feature the same theme—a warning to not “*lum-gaebon*,” or statements such as “I forgot to fulfill my vow!” and how one can rectify it. A plethora of websites and chat forums outline methods on how to resolve such an oversight. Otherwise, prepare for a life of suffering. No one wants to encounter the wrath of the spirits or any misfortune that could possibly result from an unfulfilled vow. The consequences—and in contrast, the rewards when we consider the symbiotic transaction and protection offered by a Bluetooth bond—engenders Thai Buddhists to *actively* recognize and respond to their daily entanglements with the spirit realm. What more can we learn about collective karma when we take note of spirits? Indeed, what more can we learn about Buddhists when we take note of spirits? It is only when we acknowledge spirits that we can claim to embrace sociokarma as truly collective karma.

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