

Superstitions Regarding Animals: Mutation and Reincarnation in a Thai context

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Abstract

This paper deals with the semiotic meanings of animals which are implemented in terms of social communication, traditional, cultural aspects, literature, psychology, and emotional effect. Data was collected from July to December 2015 by using documentary analysis and Google Alerts with the key words “animal mutation and reincarnation”, interviews with two villagers (a female, age 62 from Nonthaburi and a male, age 72 from Nakhon Si Thammarat). Data were analyzed with a content analysis which involves considering available information on the subject matter. The superstition concerning animal mutation and reincarnation plays an important role in Thai society for two reasons, namely it fulfills the social and psychological needs. It appears that superstition offers semiotic support for believers. The main analysis focuses on Hofstede’s principle of the avoidance of uncertainty and Buddhism which shed light on numerous kinds of superstitions in a Thai context. It is hoped that the data now available will be incorporated into a curriculum by those researchers interested in textual, social, culture studies, and religions as well.

Keywords: superstitions, animal mutation, reincarnation, beliefs about animals in a Thai context

1. Introduction

Animals have held an important place in many counties for thousands of year. Ancient peoples told animal stories by drawing symbolic visual narratives on the walls of their cave homes. Aesop’s fables used animals as examples for moral didacticism. Hybrid creatures were found among ancient Greeks and Egyptians, like griffin and sphinx which play an important role in the development in complex mythology systems. Images like these have “monster epidemic” features. Historians and archeologists are concerned with the transfer of ideology of imaginary beasts from one society to another, often in periods of major social change. Along with a variety of other social and technological innovations, beasts from the East invaded the world of Greece and Etruria. This has been called the “Orientalising of the Mediterranean” (Wengrow, 2016). The Bible and other literature also include snakes, swine and lambs or characters possessing animal-like characteristic. Nowadays animals of all kinds serve as the mascots for athletic teams or other institutions and in doing so they continue to share their traits and attributes with human beings especially in popular culture. In many languages, certain animals have specific characteristics. In Chinese, pigs are traditionally seen as clumsy animals whereas in Thailand, they can name their children “moo” (pig) if the child is chubby and lovely. (If the exam is “moo moo”, it means that it is very easy, “a piece of cake”.) However, from the point of view of Western countries, pigs are considered quite dirty. To understand intercultural difference, it is useful to study and be aware of the potential value of applied semiotics for intercultural training which possibly facilitates the cross-fertilization of findings in other academic fields in relation to the challenges of cultural diversity (Parent & Varnhagen, 2011).

2. Literature Review

The science of semiotics refers to the study of signs and symbols in various fields, especially language (Thompson, 1995). The semiotic significance of animals was studied by Marques (2002) and Costa Neto (2006) who found that the images of animals and transmitted signals are frequently transformed into what are perceived as meaningful signs and then can be investigated through a semiotic approach. Such an approach assumes that the cultural/informational web is created by intermingling not only the knowledge which is generated through the direct interactions between human experience and the stimuli of the environment, but also the feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that human beings express. To analyze the role and image of animals in this study, the following perspectives are concerned: the belief in animals concerning superstition, reincarnation, and mutation.

2.1 The belief in animals concerning superstition: reincarnation and mutation.

The transformation in Thai context deals with Buddhist teaching about reincarnation. Rebirth as an animal in the next life can be found in the story of Pla boo Thong. The soul of a suffering mother transmigrates into the body of fish to take care of her daughter. Moreover, in the gothic Thai movie, the ghost can disguise itself as a tiger in Seo Sa ming's tale. Sue Saming became a kind of amulet in some areas. This is associated with the belief in animism. The existence of ghosts and spirits is verified not only through urban legends and office gossip, but also through the media and national institutions (Ancuta, 2011). The spirits are sacred and respected for supernatural power in bringing good luck especially in protection and lottery in Thai society. Mutant animals are a good luck charm for some Thais. When bizarre animals are spotted, they apparently die shortly after birth because of their genetic mutation.



Source: www.iamhunsa.com

However, they are believed to bring good luck to the village and the family who made the discovery. Many people believe it looks like a genetic cross between two species, such as the half-buffalo, half-crocodile in High Rock, Wang Hin, Thailand is believed to be holy spirit that can help people stay safe and win the lottery (Mccrum, 2015). It was celebrated by villagers by placing lit incense and candles around its body. People usually pray and donate money to maintain the shrine.

The belief in animal mutation and superstition has associated with the lottery since the creation of lottery during the reign of King Rama VI (1868-1910) (www.wikipedia.com; the government lottery office of Thailand, 2015). Nowadays newspaper headlines and TV shows always mention the phenomena when local villagers flock to see the mutants or unusual birth of animals to divine lottery number (Audiger, 2015). Some people powder the belly of an animal and then look for a lucky number to appear. As for a mutant animal, if a calf with two heads is born, a farmer might have visitors rubbing talcum powder on its fur searching for clues as to a winning number. For example the birth of a deformed piglet, that local feel bears a striking resemblance to Ganesha, (the elephant-headed Hindu deity worshiped by many Thai Buddhists) interested many people who believe such was a miracle. According to the news report, "They came to marvel at the piglet, offering flowers, lighting joss sticks and saying prayers. Some of them even hoped that the dead porker which sat atop a makeshift shrine would somehow convey to them the winning numbers in the upcoming underground lottery draw" (Phuket Post, 2009). In addition, a bird might fly over people's head three times, retreat and then scoop in for another pass. It could all mean something that can be interpreted as a lucky lottery winner. People may know an omen and rushed to buy a lottery ticket. According to a Tharath news report, Sisaket villagers all lit incense and gathered round half-buffalo and half-calf offspring and prayed for it to bring further good luck. It is also believed that this will bring good luck to the family that owns the corpse of weird animals (Thairath, 2015).

2.2 A synergetic mix of Hinduism, Buddhism and animism.

Daniel Neiman (2015) said that there is a synergetic mix of Hinduism, Buddhism and animism. So people also worship local animistic spirits. The spirit may be angry if people do not pay homage to them. For example, an angry turtle spirit was believed to cause misfortune and illnesses to the residents and their relatives who moved to a new house because they disturbed the turtle that lived in the pond nearby and did not feed it properly. It was reported that the secretary had constant headache, the cook could not stand on her feet, a gardener coughed non-stop.

Some of relatives had road accidents: two of them died. The owner of the house had a monk come to his house for chanting and to consecrate it using sacred thread. After the ceremony, a swarm of bee made a honeycomb in the tree in the garden. This was interpreted as great luck for this house (Neiman, 2015). Although Thai society is a Buddhist society, there is a ceremony of the pledge and sacrifice for luck or success. The votive offering of the pledge are garlands, dancing, a boar's head, fruits, boiled eggs, flowers and incense. Not only are the pledge and sacrifice done with the Buddha or monks, but also with other holy images and other places. According to the way of life of ancient India, the people believed in the sacrificial ceremony which tends towards the violence to all beings, killing animals for sacrifice whereas the lord Buddha changed to a new concept being called 'the five sacrificial ceremonies' (blikamma) which is a form of social duty and welfare to each other (Siriratananuwat, 2012). It means animals are not supposed to be killed in the ceremony, instead, they are worshipped. According to Diamond (2015), it is because of this philosophy that Buddhists are encouraged to love all living beings and should not restrict their love to mankind alone, an ideal that relates closely with karma. They believe in practicing loving kindness towards every single living creature.

3. Results

A lot of Thai people believe that the reincarnated soul resides in some animals which are regarded as an auspicious omen. They also believe that the soul may be reborn either in a human body or in the body of a non-human animal (Jalan, 2015; Diamond, 2015). A case study of monitor lizard in Nonthaburi, in the north of Bangkok was regarded as a new source of inspiration for the Thai lottery "rubbers". The mentioned reptile was found sleeping under the photograph of a boy who was killed in an accident. Because of this, his suffering mother was convinced that it had been possessed by her son's spirit. Their neighbor also believed that the lizard was the dead boy after seeing its response to hearing the boy's name.

Then they started feeding it milk and drinking yoghurt. In fact the owner of the house started having to welcome busloads of people who were queuing up to the house in order to rub its skin to find out winning lottery numbers (Reuters News Service, 2001). Apart from being interested in animal 's deformities and mutation, Hugh Paxton (2010) reported that lucky lottery numbers have something to do with an animals' reincarnation. A Thai man married a snake because he believed that it was the reincarnation of his dead wife and then inevitably the snake was surrounded by all wannabe lottery winners who want the right direction numerological. It was told that he hurriedly arranged the wedding with the snake because the medium told him to marry this snake otherwise neither he nor his family would be safe and there could be an accident. To prevent any possible misfortune, he followed the suggestion and offered a dowry of 7,000 baht. Finally, the villagers welcomed the bride and groom with a parade.

The *Daily News*, April 5, 2008, reported "in the ceremony attended by around 200 villagers, the python, 3.5 meters long and weighing 20 kilograms was wrapped around the bridegroom and seemed to be nuzzling him affectionately. The groom bent down and kissed the python, provoking feelings of joy mixed with apprehension amongst the relatives present" (Bannork, 2008). The superstition concerning animal mutation and incarnation plays an important role in Thai society for two reasons, namely it fulfills the social and psychological needs. First, people can form a social network of believers who believe in the same thing. They can enjoy many ritual ceremonies together whenever they find something unusual, e.g. animal incarnation or mutation. A mutant is a symbol of luck and hope for people who want to make a fortune without working hard. It is a possible dream that is difficult to acquire, but it makes people happy with an illusion of making their dreams come true, such as winning the lottery and becoming a millionaire. The interviewees accepted that they are curious and hopeful to rub the skin of the animals. They can forget their difficulties in daily life for a while. They can make friends with many believers who have the same goal in their life. They said, "They will continue asking for the luck until the supernatural power blesses them."

The most interesting thing is that people who believe in this superstition do not worry about outside criticism although they are severely condemned for performing such disgusting behavior or for being an idiot. The mass media functions as an easy way to get access to lottery winning information of lucky person. Social media enables people who are interested in these things to get firsthand information when new "lucky" animals are discovered, so they can join in the rituals and fulfill their passion. The semiotic significance of animals was studied in term of roles and image in a Thai context. These animals have symbolic action which often works and functions in the society especially when people interpret symbols according to superstitions.

From the point of view of ethnology, Marques (2002) and Costa Neto (2006) conclude their studies with these words, “Semiotic approach indicates that the cultural web is formed by knowledge which is gained through the direct interaction between human experience and the stimuli of the environment.” It is also constructed through the feelings, beliefs and human behavior in the society.”

Furthermore, superstitious signs are based on the semiotic principle. Different cultures have different codes for their belief relating to rituals and omens upon which the society places a high value (Strausova & Strausov, 2013). Animals and superstitions have impact on a Thai context in term of language use, culture, social beliefs, and internal aspects like psychology and mood. Many superstitious people in Thailand attribute their luck to mutants or reincarnated animals. However, Ahangari (2015) emphasized that although superstitions are rejected by the learned these days, there has traditionally been a very thin line of distinction between superstitions and real science as what we now know as superstition has in some instances in the past been considered as true science.

4. Discussion

It is concluded that superstitions have a major impact into ways: psychologically and socially. In many of parts of the world, particularly in Thailand, people have numerous kinds of superstitions. In general superstition is defined by Corsini (2002) as a belief or practice based on the operation of supernatural or magical forces, such as charms, omens or exorcism or “any unscientific belief accepted without question; a groundless or unfounded notion.”



(Picture 2 source: www.eduzones.com)

Superstitions are based on interpretations of ‘signs’ or things that befall you, actions that secure benefits and avert harm. The interpretation of the signs can arrive at many different conclusions. In a Thai context, the mystery of the lottery may appear in people’s dreams when they dream of animals. This can be interpreted or decoded to find a winning lottery number. Converting dreams into numbers is written about in books in the same way that praying for inspiration, success and luckiness when an animal gives birth to malformed offspring can be found among those who have faith in that superstition and regard it as a lucky charm.

Because of this, according to du Toit (2011), superstition offers semiotic support for what people choose to believe anyway. If ordinary reality does not allow for meaningful relations to help us answer our questions, we create a semiotic space that serves as a symbolic mirror of reality. This is quite natural for when human logic fails to explain those events, imagination finds occasion to explain events. In addition, Ahangari (2015) said that this paves the way for superstitions to emerge. The imagination is so powerful that it can connect totally unrelated entities, and can do so in such a way as for the human brain to believe that the connections are true and valid. Another reason for man’s resorting to superstitions is man’s desire to hide his inability to understand the truth. Being a part and parcel of language, superstitions have had a huge impact on human thought, cognition, habits, and culture.

A superstition seems to exist in the minds of people across all socioeconomic statuses and education levels (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2000). Some Thais may be considered especially superstitious in regards to animals and superstition regarding animals seems to clarify the unknown or unexplained, as well as gives a form of emotional support to them.

This is expressed in the Thai peoples' reverence towards mutants who are regarded as having supernatural power. Superstition may be used to complement decision making in a way that provides additional information and reduces anxiety induced by uncertainty. It would be logical to expect that a person with high intolerance of uncertainty would be more vulnerable to superstitious belief (Tsangs, 2004). Stresses and strains as well as uncertainties of life can be tolerated more easily by the believers (Prakash, 2013). As far as it is concerned, two dimensions can account for superstitious practices in Thailand, namely Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1984) and religious characteristics of Ninian Smart (Smart, 1992).

Hofstede (1984) defines uncertainty avoidance as the degree to which the members of society feel uncomfortable and high uncertainty avoidance cultures are very uncomfortable with to accept the risks. Cultures have also served as an implication on the attitude and behavior of people. Being superstitious in high uncertainty avoidance cultures can help people handle their anxiety (Wong, 2012). At the 2010 World Cup, Paul the octopus selected his mussel of choice to declare his prediction for the match. In the same way, astrology is used in China to help people make decision. Khairullah (2013) stated that the Chinese are considered to be very superstitious because their action is based on their beliefs and they rely on astrology to seek good dates and luck. Like westerners and the Chinese. Thai people have varying degree of belief in the world of superstition concerning strange animals which seem to be a good omen. It is probably prevalent among other superstitions that abound in Thailand. The appearance of mutants excites locals and causes a lot of traffic in the area because people want to worship and look for a lucky charm or lottery clue.

Similarly, Smith (2008) points out that at the most general level, superstitions aid various ways, such as creating a sense of predictability in an uncertain environment, helping people deal with feelings of powerlessness, when they are dealing with personal or collective loss and giving a sense of assurance as they pass through critical rites of passage. It would seem that superstitions arise out of humans to control or at least affect our environment. Smart (1992) also mentioned that to understand religious and secular worldviews and their practical meaning, it is necessary to enter into the lives of those for whom such ideas and actions are important. Every religious movement is embodied by a religious dimension made up by a group of people that is very often rather formally organized. This dimension is called "the social or institutional aspect of religion." How the superstitions work among Thai people can be considered from the ritual ceremonies which they create in order to pay homage to weird animals or mutants. In summary, religion appears to be a psychological necessity for mankind and gradually religious practices developed into dogmas and superstitions among groups of people (Prakash, 2013).

Superstition is partly engraved in the Thai people's culture. One of the main contributing factors, could be that Thai people strongly believe in animism, which is the belief that the soul and spirit do not only exist in humans but also in other animals, life forms and objects such as plants and rocks, etc. (Wong, 2012). This can explain the reason why situation when some people have a strong belief in reincarnation. Apart from animism, it also takes other factors into account. For example reincarnated animals fulfill a psychological need when some people lose their child or partner. This also enable people to find social acceptance when other people participate in the same practices such as in wedding ceremony between a Thai man and a snake or when they engage in worship ceremonies for any other mutants they have found.

Moreover, Buddhism has influence on people's belief and because of this, people in the mainly Buddhist nation believe in reincarnation and that spirits of people can roam around after death and inhabit other people or animals (Thanissaro, 2007). According to Phongpaichit & Baker (2008), across Southeast Asia people believe that spirits of the dead act as protectors for places and people and reform Buddhism failed to suppress this tradition. In folk belief, souls that are between incarnations may find themselves stranded in this world, where they are powerful. Thailand abounds with many different forms of such spirits, some which are benign can be invoked for assistance and protection, and some which are maligned and can be directed against enemies. That is to say, the mixed belief is found among various groups of superstitious people in Thailand. The combination of belief allows the construction of rituals and semiotic patterns for superstitions.

5. Conclusion and implications

In summation, this study's attention was towards Hofstede's principle of the avoidance of uncertainty which is accepted as one of the most common elements witnessed in cultural surveys conducted in those nations. According to the semiotic support, the animals that seem to be unusual are interpreted as lucky charms in a Thai context, no matter how deformed they are.

Superstitious people seem to interpret some meaning from its body as good luck and following the discovery of those kinds of animals a ritual ceremony takes place and functions as a social gathering (Joyce, 2013). Similar to the belief in reincarnated animals, these animals play an important role in human psychology. People rely on superstition when they have opportunities to control their own life. Superstitious behavior makes them gain a sense of control for their many unanswered questions (Saucier, 2010). Animal superstition is believed to be helpful as long as they relate to desirable outcomes. Yong (2010) found that superstition can improve people's performance. During a competition, those who held a lucky charm felt more confident and optimistic than those who were not superstitious. To gain ability to understand the world, the study of people's belief is necessary for further investigation. Moreover, superstition concerning animals is found in daily life everywhere. Many animals carry luck whereas some of them are regarded as bad luck, such as the idea that water monitors in Thailand bring bad luck to the parliament if they enter the building. In Thai temples, if you set free turtles, birds, fish and river snails, it is meant to bring relief from sadness and anxiety. I still have some unanswered questions regarding role of animals and their effects in the world of superstition in other contexts, also about the superstition associated with other kinds of things like trees or plants. However, a big concern is the negative side of superstition.

Are people always able to spot the false connections in unrelated events? It is therefore critical for scholars to be aware of cultural differences because each culture has different kinds of superstition which is unique to that group of people.

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