

NOTES SECTION

The study of Samre's world view: the belief in sorcerer spirits*

PORNSAWAN Ploykaew
KhonKaen University, Thailand

1. Introduction

The Samre language is generally known as a Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language of the Pearic subgroup spoken in Cambodia (Thomas and Headley 1970; Diffloth 1974) and Thailand. Samre speakers call themselves and their language 'Samre' /samyee/. The Samre are also found in Thailand right along the Cambodian border. There are only two academic works on the language -- Theraphan (1984) and Pornsawan (2001). The former is a collection of 367 words and a rough structure of the phonological system. The latter provides both a description of the phonological and syntactical structures of the language.

The endangered situation of the Samre language in Thailand is classified in the final stage of language endangerment (Pornsawan 2001). There are only 20-30 Samre speakers left at present. All of them are over 55 years old. The older Samre people generally speak Thai and they use the Samre language only among their group. The middle-aged and younger members refuse to speak their mother tongue because their ethnic language has no script. This leads to the prediction that this ethnic language in Thailand will be lost in about twenty years.

Regarding language maintenance and preservation, or potentially revival, Wurm (1998:196) suggests as follows:

*This paper is a part of the research project "A Semantic Thesaurus of the Samre Language: A Reflection of their World View at the Final Stage of Language Endangerment." The two-years project has been sponsored by the Ministry of University Affairs and The Thailand Research Fund.

“to study seriously endangered or moribund languages in as much detail as it is possible and as far as this is possible as long as suitable speakers and informants are still available and accessible.”

Thus, the Samre language should be studied, and as much documentation as possible and data from both language structures and culture should be compiled. Since the phonology and syntax of Samre has been studied (Pornsawan 2001), the Samre’s world view is left to be investigated.

This article attempts to introduce a portion of the Samre’s world view by describing their beliefs focusing on sorcerer spirits. The data has been collected from the Samre living in Thailand by direct elicitation, written and oral interviews, observation of interactions in daily life, and from participant observation in important ceremonies.

2. General background about the Samre

2.1 History

Little is known about the origin and history of the Samre in Thailand. Their history is further confused as local Thai officers in Amphoe Borai mistakenly understood them as the original Thai in the community. Theraphan noted that as early as 1984 the Samre were located in Trat Province of Thailand (1984:116). In this article, Theraphan recounts that Mrs. Thet Rattanamun, then 85 years old, reported that her grandfather had died in the forest near the village. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Samre have lived in the border area between Cambodia and Thailand for nearly 200 years.

2.2 Population in the community

About 200 years ago, the Samre lived as a closed community of about 70 families. Because the Samre had lived in remote areas, they were gradually reduced in numbers by malaria and other illnesses. The Thai government moved the Samre to live in an area provided for other groups, their present location. The other groups living close to the Samre were the Khmer and the Central Thai and the Northern Thai, who moved to work in the ruby mines 20 years ago.

Today, there are about 140 Samre living in four villages in Amphoe Bo-Rai. They settled in areas surrounded by hills. The Samre community of Ban Mamuang consists of 15 families or approximately 60 people. There are eight Samre families in Ban Nonsi, about 40 people. A few families live in Ban Klong On, about 40 people, and, one family lives in Klong Sanoo.

2.3 *Costume*

In ancient times, the Samre didn't know how to weave, so they made their clothing from sacks which they begged from the Thai people. Men used only one piece of the sack tied up around the lower parts of their bodies. Women, however, bought needles from the local market and used the outer husk of pineapples as thread for sewing their clothing. Nowadays, both sexes buy ordinary clothes in the Thai markets. Women wear sarongs and blouses or T-shirts, and younger women wear trousers. Samre men prefer wide, black trousers and shirts, or to go shirtless. Some of the Samre tattoo their arms or backs to protect themselves against dangers, such as poisonous animals and other evils.

2.4 *Houses and villages*

The Samre construct their houses on bamboo stilts, with woven bamboo to form the walls and floors, and thatched roofs or corrugated iron. Instead of nails, they use cords of rattan or bamboo strips to fix the construction materials together. A steep ladder leads to a small porch, where guests are welcome. Inside the house, there is a step leading to a higher level, where the living and sleeping area is located. The interior consists of a single room with one or two hearths above the sleeping places. Each house contains a shrine for the sorcerer spirits, where alcohol or sweet water are placed as offerings. Some families have Buddhist altars in their houses. The furnishings are simple, such as sleeping mats, mosquito nets, baskets, and a few utensils such as pots and gourds. The fireplace, located at the rear or beside the house, is used both for cooking and heating.

The Samre village of Ban Mamuang has very few fences to mark off the compound area of one household from that of the neighbor. Many families have small outbuildings next to the main house to store rice and other agricultural products. Like in almost all rural communities, house construction is done on a shared – labor basis.

2.5 *Agriculture*

Although the Thai authorities have provided about 1 Rai¹ of land to each family, the Samre are not able to produce enough rice to support their daily dietary needs throughout the year. Besides rice they grow cassava, cucumbers, pepper, chilies, and other kinds of vegetables.

Many Samre depend on forest products to supplement their diet. They gather edible plants, such as bamboo shoots, young rattan sprouts, yams, palm

¹2.5 Rai equals one acre
MKS 35:171-182 (c)2005 See archives.sealang.net/mks/copyright.htm for terms of use.

shoots, mushrooms, lettuce, and ginger, and wild fruits such as bananas, mangoes, jack-fruit, lychee, and others. They hunt all kinds of animals inhabiting the forests and fields. In rivers and streams they catch fish, crabs and shells, with nets, traps, and their bare hands.

The Samre also gather building material from the forest. The most important materials are bamboo and rattan. Bamboo is used for weaving baskets and for producing all kinds of containers, crossbows, arrows, and many more items for daily use. In addition, the Samre gather herbs that can be used as medicine. Some of these they consume, some are sold to the local markets and some even to traders from Bangkok.

Since the Thai government now imposes a heavy fine for the destruction of the forest, this has caused the Samre difficulties in finding sufficient forest products. Because of this, some Samre have turned to wage labor in orchards and on plantations, picking fruit and nuts such as pineapple, rambutan, cashew, durian, lychee, etc. Others have taken on other wage labor such as being employees at tourist attractions on Chang Island, Rayong, or in Pattaya, Sattahiip, or even in Bangkok.

Some Samre keep a few domestic animals, such as ducks and chickens, for private consumption or occasionally for sale. A few richer families possess cattle. Dogs are trained to locate and dig out edible roots.

Both Samre men and women like to smoke and drink rice wine. Some elderly Samre people can still remember that they once fermented rice into rice wine and consumed it during festivals. Betel chewing is popular among both sexes.

2.6 Crafts

The Samre are skillful in weaving baskets, trays, and containers, and fish traps of bamboo and rattan. Many of them, staying two or three nights in the forest, gather the materials for weaving and sell their products to the Thai people.

2.7 Society

The Samre are a peaceful and gentle people. The Samre family is a small patrilineal unit. The father has the predominant role as the leader of the family and inheritance is split among family members. Samre men are principally monogamous, though divorce and separation do occur.

The Samre have been largely absorbed by the Thai people. All of them have Thai identity cards, so they have to accept the authority of the local village administrator. Moreover, they have incorporated into their lifestyles some religious and communal affairs from Thai customs.

3. The Samre beliefs and practices

3.1 *General background of the beliefs*

The Samre were a very superstitious people until recent times. As a result of the influence of the Thai people, the Samre have gradually adopted Buddhism, but they still practice animism. The Samre believe in many superstitions, which affect every area of their lives. Spirits can be both evil and good. The evil or malevolent spirits are the spirits of people who have died unnatural deaths /khamûuc taaj hon/. Good spirits are those of the ancestors /khamûuc khuup mij/. Even though the Samre belief system includes a belief in an ancestor spirit they have not developed a practice of ancestor worship. There are also household gods /khamûuc p̄ā?phuum/, who exist in a small shrine near the houses, the gods of big trees /khamûuc ?aaɿak/, the spirits that protect particular areas of the forest /khamûuc samuun/, and the sorcerer spirits /khamûuc môt/. Some of the Samre have married Kasong women², who worship their own ethnic spirits. In these households, the household spirits /khamûuc tɔŋ/³ dwell in a small basket with a lid and is placed in the bedroom.

3.2 *Role and description of the sorcerer spirit /khamûuc môt/*

The most important spiritual being for the Samre is the sorcerer spirit, which is referred to as /khamûuc môt/. This term seems to be a generic term for the supernatural powers existing in the natural surroundings, especially in the forest. When the sorcerer spirit desires to live with someone, the spirit will make them sick when he or she goes to gather things in the forest. It is believed that these spirits can contact the Samre people through a medium.

²Sunee Kamnuansin (2002:6-14) states that the Kasong people live mostly in Ban Klong Saeng, Ban Padaw, Ban Danchumphon and Ban Thang Klang of Borai district, Trat province. The language is generally known as Chong of Trat according to Martin (1974) and Headley (1978, 1985). This language belongs to the Pearic branch of Mon-Khmer subfamily within the Austroasiatic family.

³The household spirits seem to be the most important spirits among the Kasong people, especially among female. Every Kasong woman who has married using a ceremony for the household spirit must build a new house, and as a result, house her own household spirit when she has her first child. At present, there are about six families who worship both the sorcerer spirits and the household spirits in Ban Mamuang, Trat province.

3.3 *Role of a medium*

A few Samre, who have been instructed by former medium, take the role of medium -- inviting the sorcerer spirits to dwell in the body so that the human can communicate with the spirits. The Samre strongly believe in the fortune-telling skills of their mediums; thus the sorcerers are highly respected as “doctors” or /mòo khamûuc mòt/. In former times, both sexes were able to fulfill the role of medium, but it was only the ones who were weak-spirited and could easily be taken possession of by the spirits who actually became medium. Nowadays, there are only two women who are mediums among the Samre.

When the medium is asked to predict the future for someone, she places candles on a bowl containing milled rice. Then she moves a veil around her neck to cover her head. As she holds the bowl, both of her hands begin to shake. When the sorcerer spirit enters her body, the bowl is pushed away. She will then light a candle and hold the lit candle over one palm, and will describe which spirit is causing the illness or calamity and prescribe the necessary sacrifices to invite the spirit to live with the patient. The patient’s relative then has to accept the spirits by providing them with an offering of a couple of small cone shaped containers made of banana leaves and seven candles. He or she will light a candle and tell the spirits that the ceremony to honor the spirits will be performed on the third lunar month. Then, they ask the spirit to make the patient recover from their sickness and misfortune.

3.4 *The ceremony for worshiping and playing with the sorcerer spirits*

A. Time for holding the ceremony

The Samre hold ceremonies to honor and play with the sorcerer spirits during the waxing moon of the third lunar month or fourth lunar month. This ceremony can be held on any day of the week except on a Buddhist day of worship. Though this ceremony was originally done only when the Samre were afraid of offending the spirits, later the ceremony has been held every year and it has become a traditional rite. Some of them say that if they honor the sorcerer spirits in this way, then the sorcerer spirits protect and help them in many ways.

B. The preparation for the ceremony

- Before the ceremony starts, each family builds an altar. This altar is a small shelf made of wood, located above the sleeping places of the household, and it will be where the offerings will be placed. The altars are symbols of paying respect to the spirits, and it is believed that the sorcerer spirits will stay in the house with the family.

- At least one day before the ceremony will start, the hosts will go to find people who will take the roles of medium and drummer. If the medium and drummer accept the invitation, the hosts give them lit candles and a little cup of liquor, inviting them to accept the roles. They will also give them a wage of about 100 baht each. After that, they will tell their relatives and neighbors to join the ceremony.

- During the festive day, the host family members prepare the following offerings:

- an offering to the spirits called “Bai Sri”. This will include a bowl of cooked rice decorated with three levels of banana leaves around the bowl; five pieces of ready-made banana leaves for the first level, four pieces for the middle, and three pieces for the top. A small, 1 cone shaped container, made of banana leaves, covers the rice. A round red betel nut is put on the top of the cone.

- a Khmer style offering called a “kater” /kathêə/, made of a square-shaped frame of banana tree with four bamboo sticks as its legs. Four candles are put at each corner. At the center, a round red betel nut and three jack-fruits, rolled and tied with unbleached cotton thread, are put close together.

- a couple of small, cone shaped containers made of banana leaves, with a candle in each one.

- three incense sticks

- a bottle of hair oil

- a bottle of sugary water, red or green

- a mirror

- a tin of powder

- a bowl containing milled rice, unbleached cotton thread, and whole turmeric roots

Special offerings must be prepared for some spirits according to instructions previously given by the medium, for example, chicken, sweets, cooked rice, and curry etc. While the medium is being possessed by a spirit, she might eat the food that the spirit favours. Apart from food, the hosts will prepare the tools they had with them when they were ill, such as a gun for hunting animals, a knife for cutting rattan, etc.

C. The researcher's observation on the ceremony

The ceremony can be held by many families together. The researcher, as a participant, joined the ceremony on February 11th, 2002, at Bunmee's house. The following are some interesting points gained from the observation and from the written and oral interviews.

- The hosts

There were six families, acting together to hold the ceremony for the family members to accept the sorcerer spirits. They were 1) Mrs. Saengcan Rattanamun and two of her daughters, Renuu and Bunlek 2) Mr. Bunmee Rattanamun and his children 3) Mrs. Jae Rattanamun and five grandchildren 4) Mrs. Panthip Rattanamun, her children and her husband 5) Mrs. Sawej Rattanamun, her husband and children and 6) Mrs. Sang Samli.

- The mediums

At the ceremony on February 11, 2002, there were five mediums. All of them told me that they were unconscious while they had been taken possession of by the spirits and that if they were conscious they would be too embarrassed to do such activities. Even though each of the mediums were old, they seemed to be able to perform the ritual activities more actively than they would be able to in their usual lives. The women dressed more-or-less as usual, but they said that they avoid any clothing that has a stripe on it because it would be like the stripe of snakes that the sorcerer spirits are afraid of. It is also taboo for the women to eat snake and they fear that they will be punished by the sorcerer spirits for eating snake.

- Steps for worshipping sorcerer spirits

The ceremony usually starts around eight p.m. at night

(1) Before the ceremony took place, the hosts lit a candle to tell their sorcerer spirits that they would perform the ceremony that night. All of their spirits were invited to enter the mediums, who asked the spirits to take good care of everything.

(2) Then the hosts lit another candle and three incense sticks to worship the household gods. They then provided them with a little cup of liquor and a bowl of cooked rice and the offerings were placed at the sleeping places or at the spirit houses outside.

(3) Trays of offerings were brought by the representatives of the households to the meeting area, and placed either on the house or on the ground nearby.

(4) When everybody had come together, the medium placed the bowl in front of herself. She lit a candle, held the bowl containing milled rice and threw some of the rice at the tray. Then she moved a veil around her neck to cover her head. She held the bowl with both hands. Then the drummers started to hit the drum in a rhythm called /cəən kɹùu/ -- the inviting rhythm for

inviting the teacher of all spirits. Next, they changed into another rhythm called /paʔ. phêŋ/ -- the inviting rhythm for other spirits to enter the mediums. Some of them sang the inviting songs, and the drummers hit the drum quicker and quicker. After a while, the medium's body started to shake, which meant a sorcerer spirit had entered her body.

(5) While a sorcerer spirit was dwelling in the medium's body, she danced in accordance with the rhythms of the drums. Formerly, there were only three rhythms for dancing; they are /saam thoôn/, /pheeŋ iêw/, and /ʔin càn/. Some spirits preferred specific rhythms, so they asked for those rhythms. In present times, modern Thai rhythms have been included, called "sha-sha-sha" and "ram wong". These new rhythms make older Samre people uncomfortable, but they are very popular among the younger Samre. From time to time, she stopped dancing and talked with the hosts. She often asked who had made the "Bai Sri" for the ceremony, sending liquor as a reward to her or him. Some spirits liked to dress up with the hair oil, the comb, the powder, and the mirror (the spirits used the back side instead of the front side of it). Some spirits prefer to eat the special menu of their favourite food, provided by the hosts, some eat the betel nut and smoke the cigarettes. Some spirits acted as if they were carrying out an activity in the forest, such as cutting rattan, digging yam, aiming at an animal with a gun, fishing etc. These actions imitated the host's actions when they became ill, and always made the audiences amused and cheerful. Some of the hosts insisted that they never told the medium what they had said exactly at that time, but that medium could repeat exactly what they said and did.

When the spirits entered the medium to talk and play with their hosts, they greeted all the members of the family. If the spirit of a wife had entered the medium, the spirit often called for the husband as if they were "friends," and the Samre might refer to the spirit as "Phii Kloe" which meant 'the spirits who are friends.' Some families sent a representative to chat with the spirit, and to tell the spirit again that the family had held the ceremony as previously promised, so the spirits should now take good care of all of the members of the family. The hosts might inquire about their dead relatives, about how they were in the after life. If the spirits had anything to warn the members about, they would. Before the spirits left, they gave blessings to the family members, tied a thread round the wrists of the members, and blew on them chewed turmeric root to protect them.

(6) The arrival and departure of the spirits happened in a circle, from the first to the last of all the hosts' spirits. The Samre celebrated with dancing, singing and drinking during the night. Everyone enjoyed the activities. Taking part in singing the inviting songs was not obligatory for all in the ceremony, but most of them helped each other to sing the songs, which have been sung from generation to generation.

(7) The signal of the departure of the last spirit was made known by a special drum rhythm – a Khmer style -- called “tung krak.” The medium, then acted in a similar fashion as when the spirit had first entered the body – holding the bowl and following the whole procedure. After that, the hosts and the mediums brought the trays of offerings to place on the mediums’ shelves at their houses. They lit candles to announce again that this year’s ceremony had finished. The trays would be left on the shelves for three days before they would eventually be thrown away.

- Some additional observations by the researcher

Participants

It was stated that the ceremony could be counted as a big festival for the villages because there weren’t any other entertainments. In previous days, there were more drummers than at present. At Ban Mamuang, there are only seven drums left now. They made the drums from a piece of jack-fruit by digging a hole in it. Then, they stretched over the hole a piece of Cervidae skin. Many people from the villages nearby joined the ceremony. Apart from the Samre, some came to sell food, and some came to see because they were curious about a strange event. However, these days the ceremony is not well-known among outsiders.

On February 11th, 2002, about 100 people joined the ceremony including the Samre people in Ban Mamuang and Ban Klong On, and also the Thai and the Khmer people in these two villages. Some Thai officers, the public health officers and the head of the two villages, have occasionally joined the ceremony. However, most of the Thai who live some distance away, such as in Amphoe Borai, do not know about this ceremony.

Additional information

Although most of the Samre have held the ceremony for sorcerer spirits every year, some families do so only once every three years. If they want to stop holding the ceremony that year, they can ask the medium to inform the spirits before the first ceremony of the year has started.

There are a few Samre who do not hold the ceremony for sorcerer spirits because they have never been made sick by the spirits. Others however, continue to worship the spirits whether or not they have been made sick. For example, Mr. Bunmee said, “My parents have honored the spirits, so I do the same as they have done.”

4. Conclusion

Since ancient times, the spirits have been believed to be responsible for every major and minor disaster in the Samre community. Thus, the religious traditions of the Samre are intimately bound up with the local village spirits, especially the sorcerer spirits. The Samre do not have a written law among their community to guide them. However, these supernatural beings take the important role of advising and reminding people to do good things. Furthermore, if someone does not follow these ideals, for example by cutting down the big trees, or speaking or acting impolitely in the forest, it is firmly believed that he or she will become sick due to the spirits' protestation.

Lately, the Samre have been largely absorbed by the Thai people. However, the Samre have not yet completely deserted their customs and been assimilated into Thai society. They still hold their communities together by showing respect for their sorcerer spirits while also adopting Buddhism from the Thai tradition.

Fear of the spirits is an ever-present terrifying factor even for those Samre who have become Buddhists. When they are worried, they sometimes go to see Buddhist monks acting as astrologers. However, they also go to see the mediums. Therefore, although they are officially considered Buddhists, the Samre have retained their traditional animist beliefs and superstitious practices and rituals.

Although the Samre language is restricted to only about twenty Samre speakers, the ceremony for their sorcerer spirits has been performed by most of the Samre people. It can be recognized as the only unique ritual of the Samre. This ritual might be retained or lost, depending on the reactions of this minority group towards their beliefs, which is increasingly affected by the "civilized world." Trying to retain the Samre language and culture is very hard, but the effort should be made. Teenagers and young adults who have either lost their traditional language and culture, but still live within the speech community, should be encouraged to try to get reacquainted with their heritage and to take part in the performances of the traditional cultural activities.

Studying the Samre's world view, focusing on the sorcerer spirits, informs those who might be concerned with this ethnic group, such as local government officers, public health officers, and foresters. If they apply this knowledge as a device to work for Thai nation development, they might get more cooperation from the people in the community.

REFERENCES

- Diffloth, Gérard. 1974. "Austro-Asiatic languages." *EB* II:480-484.
- Headley, Robert K, Jr. 1978. "An English-Pearic vocabulary." *MKS* VII:61-94.
- Headley, Robert K, Jr. 1985. "Pro-Pearic and the classification of Pearic." In *SALS*, S. Ratanakul, D. Thomas and S. Premsrirat, eds., pp. 428-478, Bangkok: Mahidol University.
- Martin, Marie. A. 1974. "Remarques generales sur les dialectes Pear." *ASEMI* 5(1):25-37.
- Pornsawan Ploykaew. 2001. "Samre grammar." Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University.
- Sunee Kamnuansin. 2002. "Kasong Syntax." M.A. thesis, Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University.
- Thomas, David D. and Robert K. Headley. 1970. "More on Mon-Khmer subgroupings." *Lingua* 25 (4):398-418.
- Theraphan L-Thongkum. 1984. "Samre language." *JTU* 15(1):116-128.
- Wurm, Stephen A. 1998. "Methods of language maintenance and revival, with selected cases of language endangerment in the world." In Matumura.K, ed., *Studies in Endangered Languages* 1:191-212.

Received: 12 June 2004

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen
Thailand