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Sommard Marurat at his shrine to king cobras in the southern Thai province of Nakhon Si Thammarat.

Anatomy of a civil serpent

Thais have a curious relationship with cobras – some pray to them for good fortune, while others drink their blood for energy and protection against various ailments

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A king cobra lay under grandpa's bed, peeking from behind the elderly man's leather sandals. The large snake was discovered by Jak, a 10-year-old boy who raced into the room after a wayward chicken ventured in from the courtyard.

At the news of the uninvited visitor, villagers in Namaipai, in the southern Thai province of Nakhon Si Thammarat, raced to the Sukanan family's house, where the snake had taken up residence.

With a single bite, the cobra could have killed any one of the curious villagers. King cobras are the world's largest poisonous snake and can grow to 5.5 metres long. Their venom contains potent neurotoxins that paralyse the central nervous system and can fell an elephant. Death can occur within an hour of being bitten.

Thankfully, villagers managed to tease the reptile out from under the bed and manhandle it into a rice sack. They took the snake to a nearby forest and released it.

Many people would get the

shivers if they discovered a cobra in their bedroom. But not the Sukanans. They view the appearance of the snake as a good omen.

"Having an angel snake come to your home is a blessing," says Aree Sukanan, the daughter of the elderly man under whose bed the snake had hidden, and mother of the boy who discovered it. "My father dreamed about a snake and the next day we found the snake under his bed."

The Thai villagers call king cobras "angel snakes" and believe them to be manifestations of supernatural beings. They credit the reptiles with magical qualities, including the ability to appear and disappear at will and to turn into human beings.

Many believe the snakes can bestow wealth and good health on people. "Since the angel snake came to us things have been improving," says Aree, who owns a rubber plantation. "My business is better and I'm feeling less tired."

In recent years, several other families in the village have had similar experiences with cobras. Local environmentalists are not surprised.

"Snakes are losing their natural living spaces to people,"

says Nonn Panitvong, a conservationist who runs a group on social media aimed at educating Thais about snakes coming into their homes. Each year, he says, tens of thousands of such serpentine visitations take place in Thailand, involving many species, from harmless tree snakes to deadly monocled cobras.



They don't bite us. They only come to warn us or bring us luck. If I see one, I wai to him respectfully

SOMMARD MARURAT, SHRINE OPERATOR

Worshippers believe their wishes will be granted when a cobra appears.

"Snakes enter houses to hide or look for food," Nonn says. "People often kill them on the spot."

But residents in Namaipai tend not to harm the snakes. They believe visiting cobras are a sign of impending good fortune. Some even erect shrines to them, and ply the statues with offerings.

"We ask the angel snakes for their help," says Sommard

Marurat, an octogenarian who has set up one such shrine featuring two wooden king cobra statues. "We're not afraid of king cobras. They don't bite us. They only come to warn us or bring us luck. If I see one, I wai to him respectfully," he says, referring to the traditional Thai greeting.

Such respect for king cobras is common. Across Thailand, the snakes have long been dreaded and revered in equal measure. The mythical Naga serpents whose images adorn local Buddhist temples are often depicted as seven-headed king cobras.

According to Buddhist lore, once when the Buddha was immersed in meditation a giant king cobra appeared and spread its hood over him to shelter him from the elements.

Many Thais believe the spirits of snakes communicate with them. "Sometimes the Cobra Queen appears in my dreams," says Yupin Saoklang, a petite woman who works in a factory. "She tells me to pay my respects to her ... If I don't do that for a while, my luck begins to run out."

So Yupin makes sure to frequent the Shrine of the Cobra Queen, a sanctuary in Thonburi, a district of Bangkok that is dedicated to an angelic being who worshippers believe can take the form of a female king cobra.

Yupin is there on a recent Sunday morning, along with dozens of others who have come to present offerings to a large effigy of the ferocious snake. The stylised cobra is crowned with a golden tiara and covered in gold leaf. It's surrounded by statues of other hooded cobras, their heads raised and fangs bared.

Piling up on stone tables before it are trays of eggs and whole chickens. In return for these gifts, worshippers ask for favours: a better job, a new partner, a win at the lottery. Some of them write their requests on pieces of paper, which they fold and place in the effigy's snarling mouth along with banknotes as further enticement to grant their wishes.

"I have heard if you lose money, you can get it back after you petition the Cobra Queen," says Somchai Kunopahad, 65, a taxi driver who is here for the first time. Somchai says he lost a large



sum of money when someone withdrew cash from his bank account with a fake ID. "The police don't want to help me," he says. "Maybe the Cobra Queen will."

Bordering the shrine on one side is a plot of land overgrown with thick tropical vegetation.

The site is home to several cobras. Visitors watch them come and go from a ground-floor window. Momentarily a grey serpent slithers out of the thick undergrowth to nose around eggs thrown to the ground as offerings. Then another cobra appears and disappears. Then another.



When I have some extra money, I like to get a shot of snake blood. It's better than Red Bull

MOTORCYCLE TAXI DRIVER

"When a cobra appears, your wish will be granted," says Nulam Paipanom, 49, an office worker who travelled here from a nearby province. "We believe in the sanctity of this shrine. If wishes were not granted, why would so many people keep coming here?"

As the story goes, years ago when a nearby road was being built through a patch of greenery, a female king cobra appeared in a dream to the driver of a bulldozer. She pleaded with him to halt construction so she could bear her offspring in safety.

The workers did not heed her

plea and accidentally killed her hatchlings. In revenge she began killing the men and their loved ones in a series of freak accidents. To placate the vengeful serpent, locals built her this shrine.

It would seem that you kill a cobra at your peril. Yet, nearby, some other Thais are about to do just that. In a wire-mesh hutch in the Bangkok neighbourhood of Klong Toei, cobras coil in listless heaps in the afternoon heat. One fawn-coloured cobra raises its head and flicks its tongue inquisitively. Today, the snake is on the menu. The cage is at a mobile food stall where men sit on folding chairs at plastic tables. They are here not to worship cobras but to drink their blood.

A server hooks the inquisitive serpent with a fire iron and plucks it out onto a table. Disoriented, the cobra bobs and sways. Suddenly the man smacks the snake from behind. The cobra spreads its collar in warning. He slaps the irate reptile again. He does this to get its blood up. Adrenaline pumping through a cobra's veins is believed to make the medicinal properties believers attribute to the snake's blood more potent.

The outlet's owner is an elderly Thai-Chinese man with a clouded eye, who is standing at a table with surgical instruments on it. A sign pinned to his pickup truck reels off ailments that cobra blood allegedly cures or alleviates: impotence, lethargy, cirrhosis.

His attendant ties the snake up by its neck, causing its forked tongue to protrude piteously. The old man wraps a handkerchief around the cobra's head and wipes the snake down with a wet cloth. He seems almost affectionate. He then takes a scalpel and slits open the cobra's abdomen. As its blood drains into a tumbler, the snake twitches and goes limp.

The old man adds some whisky to the blood, and hands the cocktail to a customer. "When I have some extra money, I like to get a shot of snake blood," says the customer, a motorcycle taxi driver. "It's better than Red Bull," he says, referring to the popular energy drink.

Isn't he afraid of the Cobra Queen's revenge? "No," the man says after some thought. "I don't think this was an angel snake."

