

The Yak of Thailand: Folk Icons Transcending Culture, Religion, and Media

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Abstract—In the culture of Thailand, the Yak serve as a mediated icon representing strength, power, and mystical protection not only for the Buddha, but for population of worshippers. Originating from the forests of China, the Yak continues to stand guard at the gates of Buddhist temples. The Yak represents Thai culture in the hearts of Thai people. This paper presents a qualitative study regarding the curious mix of media, culture, and religion that projects the Yak of Thailand as a larger than life message throughout the political, cultural, and religious spheres. The gate guardians, or gods as they are sometimes called, appear throughout the religious temples of Asian cultures. However, the Asian cultures demonstrate differences in artistic renditions (or presentations) of such sentinels. Thailand gate guards (the Yak) stand in front of many Buddhist temples, and these iconic figures display unique features with varied symbolic significance. The temple (or wat), plays a vital role in every community; and, for many people, Thailand's temples are the country's most endearing sights. The authors applied *folkography* as a methodology to illustrate the importance of the Thai Yak in serving as meaningful icons that transcend not only time, but the culture, religion, and mass media. The Yak represents mythical, religious, artistic, cultural, and militaristic significance for the Thai people. Data collection included interviews, focus groups, and natural observations. This paper summarizes the perceptions of the Thai people concerning their gate sentries and the relationship, communication, connection, and the enduring respect that Thai people hold for their guardians of the gates.

Keywords—Communication, Culture, Folkography, Icon, Image, Media, Protection, Religion, Yak.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE uninformed or unsuspecting first time visitor to the departure hall of Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, Thailand cannot help but notice the sixteen foot massive statues known as Yak, standing as “decorative visual elements in the passenger terminal” [1]. The Dvarapala (Sanskrit for Yak) serve as door or gate guardian statues, either human or demonic, in Hinduism and Buddhism. Traditionally placed outside the religious temples, the images serve to protect the holy places inside building structures. The Dvarapala stands as fierce-looking creatures that provide a strong defense against all spiritual enemies, while offering powerful protection for those people that may be in their presence.

Depending on the size and wealth of the temple, the guardians often appear in sets of two, looming over visitors

and religious faithful alike as they enter and exit the temple area. In the international airport at Bangkok, twelve Yak vigilantly stand guard to protect the people of Thailand from evil, while also blessing those who venture from the country [2].

The origin of the Yak, however, cannot be necessarily ascribed to any particular group in Thailand [3]. In Buddhism, the imagery of waging war or serving as a warrior provides a powerful, spiritual metaphor representing the battle one must engage in order to destroy the *kleshas* (delusions), thought to create negative karma, such as anger, attachment, ignorance, and non-virtuous attitudes [4]. Door guardians are found in many and various forms in Asia and provide figurative reminders of the vigilance that practitioners should have on their minds, constantly watching and preventing negative attitudes from winning over positive [2].

II. METHOD

Folkographers have (at least) five options for data collection while in the field. *Folkography* is just one variation of the qualitative approach to research. *Folkographers* seek the perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and feelings of the people targeted for study. Note that the *folkographer* seeks the *voice* of the folk, or the target population for any particular field study. This methodology introduces the perceptions of the “grassroots” population, rather than the empowered or the elite. Options for data collection include:

A. Astute Observation

The *folkographer* systematically observes the established trends, traditions, behaviors, communication practices, or cultural patterns of the people (or folk).

B. Interview

Narrative theory suggests that people (folk) relate, frame and understand their world through the act of recounting stories. Humans tend to relate life and culture through the story [5]. *Folkographers* seek the story (or voice) of respondents through interviews. Though the interview can take many forms (casual, semi-structured, structured, or formal), candid discussions of the topic with respondents remains significant for *folkographers*.

C. Focus Group

Focus groups gather in a location to discuss the ramifications of thematic questions, usually pertaining to study objectives. *Folkographers* rely on a “Grand Tour Question,” which embodies the focus of the comprehensive

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research. Applying the rules of communication appropriate for focus groups, the method provides a practical means to gather data in an efficient amount of time.

D. Plenary Session

Larger gatherings, such as town meetings, civic meetings, and community events often provide a platform for *folkknographers* to record public insights, perceptions, and stories emanating from this public venue. *Folkknographers* have the opportunity to observe attendants speaking and/or “tagging off” from storylines others in the audience have recounted.

E. Content Analysis

Folkknographers should seize the opportunity to read, decipher, translate and study documents, materials and writings from the targeted population (the folk under study). *Folkknographers* utilize content analysis to obtain an inside perspective on statements offered by the folk under investigation. Content analysis offers the *folkknographer* a self-described view of the culture under observation [6].

Folkknography offers a myriad of opportunities to identify and collect the essential elements of the voice of the people. *Folkknographers* should use at least three techniques of data collection. Triangulation of the data provides an element of rigor, especially a sense of reliability and accuracy in the results of study. In this study, the researchers used the interview (67), the focus group (4), content analysis (12) and astute observations (5) for collecting data. Translators were used in some instances; but, for the most part, respondents answered in English with carrying degrees of competency. This paper attempts to deliver the *voice* of Thai “folk” regarding the Yak as icons that transcend culture, religion, and media in Thailand.

III. RESULTS

A. Origins of the Mythical Message

The Yak emerged from a deep, mythical and folkloric background to come into prominence within the culture of Thailand. Originally, the Yak guarded the resources of the deep, mystical forests of Southern Asia [3]. The mission of the Yak encompassed guarding the earth and all treasures therein. Their original intimate relationship to large tress may explain their immense stature. Yaks may have been created as tall entities because such images convey a sense of power. The Yak’s origin can be traced to the forests of China. “In the early history of the Thai (Siam) peoples, the Chinese had impact on language, culture, traditions, myths and religion.” [7]. In the book entitled, *A History of Thailand*, Baker and Phongpaichit reveal “how a world of mandarin nobles and unfree labour evolved into a rural society of smallholder peasants and an urban society populated mainly by migrants from southern China” [8]. The Yak entered the Thai consciousness through stories about guardians of the deep forests of China. The Yak, also known as Yaksha (masculine) or Yakshini (female), originally served as the caretakers of the natural resources and treasures of the earth [9]. Ancient Asian people associated

these giant creatures with forests, trees, tree roots, and caves. They appear not only in the traditions of Buddhism, but also Hindu, Jain and other forms of Asian belief systems. Early stories emanating from mountain villages recount the tales of warrior-like giants that fly from mountain tops to trees, guarding the natural world against evil ghosts, predators, and demonic influences [10].

A yak with fangs guards the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew) within the grounds of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand. In Thailand, a yak is a giant demon (ogre, colossus, monster, or titan) from the Ramakian (the Thai version of the Hindu Ramayana epic mythology). The Grand Palace (or Phra Borom Maha Ratcha Wang, in Thai) was built on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River, beginning construction in 1782 during the reign of Rama I. the palace served as the official residence of the king of Thailand from the 1700s to mid-1900s [11].



Fig. 1 Yaks guarding the Grand Palace - Bangkok, Thailand.

In the Chinese traditions, the giants guarded the forests and fought evil. Sometimes the Yak slid to the other side of the spiritual realm causing mischief. The giant icons also made alliances with human clan leaders to fight common enemies. The roots of the Thai Yak originate in Asian folklore [12]. Many stories remain in the common conversations and children’s stories of today. One female respondent recounted:

The Yak once guarded the forests of the King when it was on the other side of the river. A great wizard lived nearby. The Yak enjoyed teasing the wizard with difficult questions and riddles. The wizard often needed to cross the river and asked the Yak to carry him. He did so but caused the wizard much grief each time he carried him. The Yak would ask him about the King, his family, the news of the kingdom and even about other kingdoms. One day, while transporting the wizard across the river, the Yak asked the wizard if he liked water. The wizard said “No! We do not like water!” With one shrug, the Yak dumped the wizard into the river while uttering loud, booming laughter. The wizard emerged from the river angry and unsettled. “You must pay for this disrespect!” cried the wizard. “Because of your impotence, you must stand still at the gate of the King’s Palace forever. You

may not move unless there is trouble. Go now! Stand like a stone and never leave your post!" To this day, the Yak stands at the gates of the Palace in payment for his disobedient acts." (Respondent 62)

Originating from the deep forest of China, the Yak transcended through the mystical realms of the deep forests to doors and gates throughout Southern Asia, finally taking up residence in Thailand as guardians for the gates of kings, priests, travelers and the Buddha.

B. Revealing a Religious Message

For centuries, Buddhism and versions of it have been essential to the foundation of Thai culture [13]. Wyatt writes that "Buddhism played a critically important role in assimilating indigenous groups into the Thai population" [14]. The Yak plays a definite role in the religion of Thailand [15]. While making astute observations in the Grand Palace, this *folkknographer* logged this journal entry:

She approaches the Yak with head bowed, eyes to the ground. She carries a set of worship beads along with a small chain of flowers. About five feet from the base of the huge, imposing image of the Yak, she kneels. She speaks quietly toward the image but never raises her eyes (or head) to view the face or embodiment of the giant. For over five minutes she speaks. After this time of speaking (maybe praying), she puts the ring of flowers on the base of the Yak along with the beads. She backs away, never turning her back to the image before her. After she moves over 20 feet beyond the Yak, she turns and disappears into the throng. The breeze gently moves the flower pedals on the thong holding them. Some Thai believe that the Yak offer protection, not only to the temples or the Grand Palace, but also to the humble Buddhist who seeks the assistance of the giant guardian. The Yak may be convinced to help in simple requests such as guarding a sum of money, or providing safety in a family journey, or more difficult tasks such as saving a dying loved one or keeping the King safe. (Observation 4)



Fig. 2 A woman speaks (maybe prays) to the Yak.

Another respondent remarked, "The Yak offers protection. It matters not from what or for what ... you can seek the protection of the Yak and you will have it!" (Respondent 17).

To the faithful believer, the Yak offers religious safety and protection for the supplicant (or person seeking assistance).

Peter Berger, a well-known sociologist, had much to say about religious symbols and their impact on culture. According to Berger, symbols seem so powerful because they express the most important value in life: the feeling that reality is a meaningful order - not random chaos [16]. Religion teachers hope to persuade their followers that the universe, the individual, and the social group's realities are based on the same unified and orderly pattern. The Yak, in this case, gives stability, protection, and power to the worshiper. Buddhism provides the ordered universe the worshiper seeks. The Yak stands tall, giving the religious disciple confidence. The Yak holds a powerful weapon (sword) to provide followers protection, power, and even revenge if necessary. The Yak has a fierce countenance, so that all people may know the seriousness of religious messages.

Berger proposes that culture consists of the totality of a human group's products, images, and symbols [16]. Some symbols (such as the Yak) are material and others are not. Human beings produce tools and symbols in various forms that allow for the modification of the physical environment. Humans produce language and, through the power of language, images are created that permeate every aspect of life. There is good reason for thinking that the production of non-material culture simultaneously affects human behavior. The product of abstract thought, the Yak transcended from the forests as revered icons of protection, power, and Divine presence.

"Bound with the concept of Triphum, or the tree realms of existence (heaven, earth and the underworld), the architecture of Siam is infused with cosmological symbolism." [17]. The Yak offers symbolic spiritual protection for the worshiping "folk" and for the temple structure itself. In the symbolic and spiritual world of the temple - good battles evil - Yak guardians keep the evil out while permitting good to enter. A male respondent noted:

The Yak can read a person's heart. The Yak knows if you mean to desecrate the temple or cause harm to the priests or worshippers. Although the Yak may appear as a statue, he can come alive if necessary. He may come upon you later as you walk in another place or as you sleep in your bed at night. If the Yak wants to find you he will find you. He prevents evil from coming into the sacred place or heart. (Respondent 47)

The Yak represents one of many images used by those who embrace Buddhism to demonstrate that the belief system operates throughout the culture. "Taken together, the spatial configuration and formal composition of the Grand Palace demonstrate that Siamese architecture operates as representation: a system of signs, a culturally constructed artifact, instead of an object existing in its given nature" [18].

In light of this, the authors discover the Yak meets an important need that Thai people share. The Yak present a sense of security or protection.

Everything in the Grand Palace, therefore, exists for a reason. The Yak stand guard to keep evil out and ensure

that goodness prevails. The Yaks tower over the walkways and cast long shadows in the afternoon Thailand sunshine. No visitor can pass into the Grand Palace without confronting a Yak and they most certainly will confront you. The same stands true for any person visiting a temple where the Yaks stand guard. Their presence provides a stunning image as you prepare to enter the gates. Sometimes in front the *Bot* entrance there is a couple of *Yak* (ยักษ์); huge statues representing giants with big teeth. Those *Yak* are supposed to frighten the spirits or demons who would like to enter the *Bot* [19].



Fig. 3 Ancient mystical Yak stands guard in the Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

The most famous Yak in Thailand are located in the Royal temple, Wat Phra Kaew, in Bangkok. This temple contains the famous Emerald Buddha cut from a single block of jade. Tradition suggests that the jade block originated from a mountain where Yak once stood guard, giving protection to the jade deposits for centuries. The Yak followed the jade block from the original mountain, standing guard as the Buddha was cut from the stone, protecting the Emerald Buddha on his journey. Today, the Yak stands outside Wat Phra Kaew guarding the Emerald Buddha to this day [19]. Probably no icon could hold a greater position in the Thai religion except for the actual living Buddha himself. The Yak wards off evil spirits, blesses the sojourner, protects the worshipper, and guides the searchers of the faith.

One interesting observation provided by a respondent recounts the fact that, like the faithful Buddhist believer, the

Yak must make the journey to enlightenment. "The Yaks walk just like me. We must all make the journey. They seek the light just like I do. They want to make sure I make the journey because that will help them make the journey. We all do this together you see?" (Respondent 26). The Yak may guide but sometimes also must follow. The journey completes the circle.

The religious followers of Buddha in Thailand make a journey, seeking enlightenment and personal connection to a world beyond the physical. The Yak serves as a guardian of the gates, allowing access to the spiritual realm having transcended through the folklore into the religion. The Yak makes the same journey. The Thai people and the Yak walk in lock-step in the quest for religious empowerment.

C. Images of An Artistic Message

The images depicted in art work, sculpture, and icons throughout Asia represent expressions of culture, living, thinking and attitudes of the people that create them [20]. The image of the Yak represents cultural, artistic, and intellectual expressions of the Thai culture. The figures appear in various forms in murals, the Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, temples and the Grand Palace [21].

The images in the murals of the Grand Palace depict the Yak's ability to fly, fight, uproot and throw trees, slay enemies, and serve as guardians in various aspects. Most importantly, the Thai people perceive the Yak as magnificent artistic expressions of their culture. The giant icons have transcended through folklore, into religion, and now into the essence of Thai art and culture. Two respondents noted:

The color of the Yak is very important. The green represents the male. He stands as the warrior and protector of the temple gate. The female is red. She works alongside the male to make sure no evil enters the temple. They both stand as strong warrior images. They stand as good against evil. (Respondent 22)

I see the Yak as a statue. They stand as statues that make the Thai people think about our religion, our nation and our King. We love the King and we must protect the nation from evil and wrongdoing. The statues remind us of that obligation. The Yak represents all of that for us. (Respondent 26)

In the Airport, however, the female respondent's comments about gender do not necessarily hold true. The numerous large statues tower over the travelers and workers at an impressive sixteen feet high. These Yak vary in color and appear in blue, green, red and even pink. The artistic work appears detailed, dramatic, certain, and complete. The feet, hands, military armour, weapons, facial features, tusks, eyes and helmet all display tremendous attention to detail. (Observation 5)

The Yak shape and dimensions provide an artistic expression in greatness. The size of the Yak impresses the onlooker, even in the mural depictions. Being gigantic in presence allows the Yak an advantage over mere mortals. The Yak depicted stature, strength, menacing tusks, large weapons, and square shouldered demeanor present them as able opponents and effective guards for the Thai people. The Yak represents power, authority, ability and great strength. "They

represent Thai greatness and pride.” (Respondent 41). Through the various media of art, the Thai Yak towers over others quietly but powerfully proclaiming the excellence of their iconic presence in the various venues.

Throughout the world, cultures seek to portray their collective greatness, pride and power through various icons [22]. The Thai embrace the Yak in order to portray cultural strength, historical presence, artistic beauty and national identity.

D. Creating a Cultural Message

The Yak serves as a teaching tool for many Thai people. The mural depictions of the Yak in the Grand Palace and other places allow teachers, religious leaders, priests, parents and adults to educate the youth or the novice concerning the importance of vigilance, avoiding evil and guarding the truth [23]. Wyatt observes, “Sometimes, public spaces illustrated stories and lessons known to everyone, in which case they serve as public lessons” [24].

In the Airport at Bangkok, several Yak tower over the crowd, providing a dominant cultural symbol for traveler’s to notice. Kenneth Burke’s work on identification provides insight into the importance of the Yak and their role in Thai culture. Identification of symbols empowers humans to see religious and cultural persuasion in relation to identification through symbolic representation. Burke wrote that “people naturally respond to symbolism in their quest for this identification;” all of this serves, according to Burke, as “a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” [25]. A symbol is simply a monument, a statue (like the Yak), a building or a document that represents or stands for something else by way of association, resemblance, or convention. Examples of symbols are the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, the Parliament buildings in Westminster, a statue to the Unknown Soldier, the Constitution of the United States, and the Declaration of Independence, and of course, the Yak in Thailand. It is interesting to watch and listen to the people of Thailand as they respond with recognizable enthusiasm as to the Yak’s presence in the Airport [25].

Koompong maintains that “the passenger terminal at the Suvarnabhumi encompasses a modern way of expressing Thai identity as much as a Thai way of engaging global culture and modernity” [1]. He refers to the Yak in the terminal as aesthetic visual effects [26]. These giant statues called Yak stand in front of the revered temples of Thailand providing artistic expression for the visitors, worshipers, and the curious as well those just passing by. They intend to frighten the evil spirits and protect the Buddha statues from all enemies.

One respondent observed the huge size of the statues. “I heard about them but this is the first time I have been here at the airport and these statues are so big. Who made them? I wonder how they got them here. My mother told me about the Yak when I was a boy. They are bigger than I thought!” (Respondent 48)

The Yak also appear in popular Thai culture. Based on a traditional Buddhist story The Ramayana, Thai movie makers

released an animated film entitled *Yak: The Giant King* which turns out to be the modern day version of the story of Tosakan and Hanuman the Monkey King who, in their one millionth and one reincarnation, set out on a quest for liberation. The story is known by every youth in Thailand [27].

Two respondents observed:

I have known the Yak since I was a child. (Laughing) My parents taught me that if I did not obey the Yak would come and eat me up. I believed them. I was afraid. In fact, (laughing) I am still afraid. I rush past the Yak in case it comes to life when I am walking by! (Respondent 22)

“I know the Yak. I respect the Yak. They can fly. The can disappear and then reappear. I believe they are real. From my childhood, I have known about the Yak.” (Respondent 19)



Fig. 4 Two ornate Yak guard the gates at a remote temple in Khao Kalok, Thailand.

The Yak are even included in the Thai alphabet. The word Yak (giant) is used for the letter equivalent to the English letter Y [28]. To illustrate the 34th consonant of the Thai alphabet, the Thai children use “ย ยักษ์” (yo yak) as the traditional method for learning [29]. This cultural, educational, grammatical axiom ensures the identity of the Yak with all Thai speakers. Just as in English teaching A is for apple and D is for dog, so it is that for the Thai, Y is for Yak (the giant cultural icon). One female respondent noted:

I learned the story of the Yak as a young girl in school. Learning the letters in school told me about the Yak. The giants roam the forests and appear when evil threatens. If I act evil, the Yak may appear to punish me. I have known about the Yak since being a baby. (Respondent 38)

If you’ve ever travelled via Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi airport, you’ve probably seen at least one of these

imposing figures with their fangs, painted faces and bulging eyes. Known in Buddhist mythology as yaksha, they are guardian warriors who keep away evil spirits and can be seen at a number of temples in Thailand. The figures on display at Bangkok airport are replicas of the famous yaksha at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaeo). In Thai, the figures are often simply referred to as yak (giant) and Thai children become familiar with these male and female giants from an early age. In the same way that children from English speaking countries may learn from picture cards that 'a is for apple' or 'd is for dog', Thai youngsters are taught that the consonant 'yau' is for yak [30].

The respondents in the interviews perceive the Yak as working in harmonic pairs. Many of the respondents maintained that one of the guardians was male while the other female. The stories that accompany the Yaks guarding the airport do not describe dual action or paired cooperation. The folk interviewed, however, tended to agree that the Yaks guarding the temples and Grand Palace operated as pairs (male and female). This may be more of a reflection of Thai cultural relationships rather than traditional or historical teaching [12]. In any case, one respondent maintained,

They are pairs. Two warriors: one female and one male. They guard the temple. They guard me. They are not married. At least I don't remember that they are married. They are equal but one is a woman and one is a man. They just work together if any evil comes to try to enter or defeat the temple. They guard the priest. They guard the people. (Respondent 39)

Whether appearing in the Thai school system as a letter reference, a comic character in a popular movie, or as an advertisement in a children's book, the Yak has succeeded in ascending to icon status in the culture of Thailand. From the obscurity of the dark forests of China to the main streets of Bangkok, the Yak serves, not only as a guardian of the temples, but also as guardians of Thai culture. The journey continues from forests and folklore, to temples, through murals and eventually transcending culture. The power icon evolves in message, meaning and mediums.

E. Meanings of a Militaristic Message

The visual appearance of the Yak gives even the most casual observer the impression that the giants stand as military guards or warriors. The facial features, the at-the-ready stance and the weapon held up front seem to ensure the observer knows that this is a militant expression of Thai culture. A well-spoken, older Thai gave this account:

The Yak is a character in the Ramayana, a key influence for Thai art and people. A green ogre-like race, Yak is a great army under the demon king Ravana who is in the fight against the Sri Rama. Being an opponent of Sri Rama whose ape-like troop is led by Hanuman, Yak symbolizes ferocity and endurance and this can be seen as they stand like statues or stones at the gate of Thai temples and other key places in Thailand. The Yak has

become a Thai character familiar to even to foreign people.

Hanuman, a central character in the Ramayana, is substantially influential to Thai people and through Thai art. Hanuman, a white ape-like race of forest-dwellers, is an incarnation of the divine and a disciple of Lord Sri Rama in the struggle against the demon King Ravana. Hanuman is a key player in the virtuous army against the Yak (the Demon Guardian) troop. He is known for his incomparable versatility, agility and might. His great talent is reflected in his ability to impersonate and magically become invisible.

The Yak as warrior appears most certainly to even the most casual observer. He holds a mighty sword encased in a jewel encrusted sheath and is clothed with an Asian array of armor that attaches to his shoulders in powerful fashion. He has unique boots, a helmet, thick belt and padded breastplate. In all of his appearance, the Yak stands at the ready. He seems more than capable to wage war, defend his charge or scare away evil doers. His military fitness is evident to any observer. (Respondent 12)

The images like the Yak have served the Thai people in various ways for centuries [31]. The Yak has guarded the earth and the earth's treasures, the various leaders and kings, and they have warred against evil and Thai enemies throughout the ages [31]. Whether on temple wall murals or at the gates, the Yaks' war-ready countenance remain unmistakable; the weapons and armor displayed impressively and their power evident in every aspect. The Yak willingly serves as the army for good purposes, but also sometimes resorts to less than righteous activity. In other words, sometimes the Thai perceive the Yak as demons. One male respondent noted:

The Yak will fight but they sometimes fight each other.

The have politics just like humans. They must fight the bad and protect the good. They stand ready to fight the ones who would hurt the Buddha. They keep away the ones who would steal the Buddha. Sometimes they put fear in people. They are big, strong and powerful. They are Buddha's army. They can also be mischievous, angry or even mean. (Respondent 17).

Thai people possess the capacity to protest and defend themselves if necessary. History demonstrates that Thai people stand ready to defend their homeland [32]. The Yak provides the Thai people a military image that they can honor and embrace. The giant warrior provides an icon for the confidence, strength, and power that Thai people may not otherwise envision.

This duality of good and evil may cause confusion for people of Western cultures. Asian cultures suffer no such contradictions. Good and evil depend upon perception. What one culture may identify as good, another may identify as bad. The Thai version of Buddhism offers up a notion that good and evil can exist in the same circumstance depending upon the agent operating. The Yak can be both "good and evil" [33].

IV. CONCLUSION

Thai people recognize the Yak. Thai people are noted for their unconditional smile, but the mention of the Yak during interviews brought a nostalgic recognition visible in their facial demeanor. The respondents nodded consent, smiling broadly as they readily shared their memories, impressions and perceptions of the Yak. The Yak serves as mythical, cultural, religious, artistic, and militaristic icons of great significance for the Thai people.

In this study, researchers discovered that the Yak represent power, protection and promise for the Thai people. The giants possess super powers that include flying, great strength, and spiritual insights. The guardians have the ability to detect the intentions of people moving around their physical or supernatural space. The Yak make negotiated relationships with humans and treaties with other spiritual beings. The Yak of Thailand can appear or disappear, heal themselves or change their outward appearance, depending upon the special gifts allotted to the specific giant being. This mystical action generally occurs in the realm of the spiritual cosmos where human constraints do not regulate behavior.

The symbolic journey of the Yak can be traced from the mystical mountains and deep forests of Southeast Asia through the temples and palaces of Siam, and eventually into the very heart of present day Thailand's national identity. When confronted with a photograph of the Yak, respondents recognized the image immediately, readily sharing their perceptions on the subject. The Yak maintains their journey through Thai culture by transcending art, religion, and media, while emerging meaningful icons of the Thai culture and national consciousness.

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