

Proposal on Songkran in Luang Prabang:

A Study of Rituals and Symbols

In the Perspectives of Semiotic Anthropology

By

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Objective and Scope

This paper is a part of my research grant funded by Thammasat University. It aims to undertake an in-depth study of the historical significance and the development of Lao culture, to interpret and decipher the culture represented in the form of rituals, performances, folktales, signs and symbols found in the annual Songkran festivals. Like other countries in Southeast Asia, Lao has been known for centuries as a crossroads for both trade and culture. It has been indianized since the beginning of the Christian era, and colonized by Western people for over a hundred years. During the Songkran festivals, I discovered that the indigenous people have presented official performances to express their art and belief originating from the Hindu-Buddhist mythology, as well as their feeling against the colonization of their land. Their performances serve not only as entertainment, but as political expressions also. *By applying the semiotic study into my research, I propose to study how the past and the present are linked in the semiotic structures of the Lao society with the representations of symbolism of the culture.*

This study was made within the framework of semiotic anthropology. By employing semiotic study, I expect to decipher the meanings of symbols used by the Lao as a means to express their aesthetic inheritance from India and their feelings *viz a viz* political movements. I used the theoretical and methodological approach of Clifford Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1969) for analyzing Lao national Songkran festivals as the most significant sacred symbols, which represents Hindu-Buddhist and indigenous religious traditions, as well as political expressions and their group/self identity. Also, I adapted the idea of Morris's

classification of semiotic into syntactics, semantics and pragmatics to analyze three different levels of culture.

According to Geertz (1973: 3-30), cultures are “socially established structures of meaning” and “structures of significance” that signify to the users a common understanding of the world as well as the conceptions of group/self identity. Central to Geertzian symbolic analysis is the identification of the role of public symbols that people use to conceptualize their experiences and to communicate their conceptions to others. The adoption of the Geertzian model of culture and symbols is useful to interpret and analyze the Lao culture and their group/self identity.

The symbols embodied in the Lao Songkran festivals express their aesthetic inheritance from India and their feelings *viz a viz* political movements, which construct their group/self identity.

Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process* (1969) and in several other books, offers a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of dominant symbols. Dominant symbols are multivocal, and they represent different meanings for different people and different generations. The anthropologist must examine how the symbols are used in different contexts, and investigate how the different components of the symbols acquire importance for different people at different times.

Such symbolism will reveal the origin and maintenance of the symbols with reference to the experiences of those who have created and used them as well as of those who continue to use them, although in a modified way.

The last day of the year: the preparations for welcoming a new spirit and a change in fortune through displaying yearly animal flags.



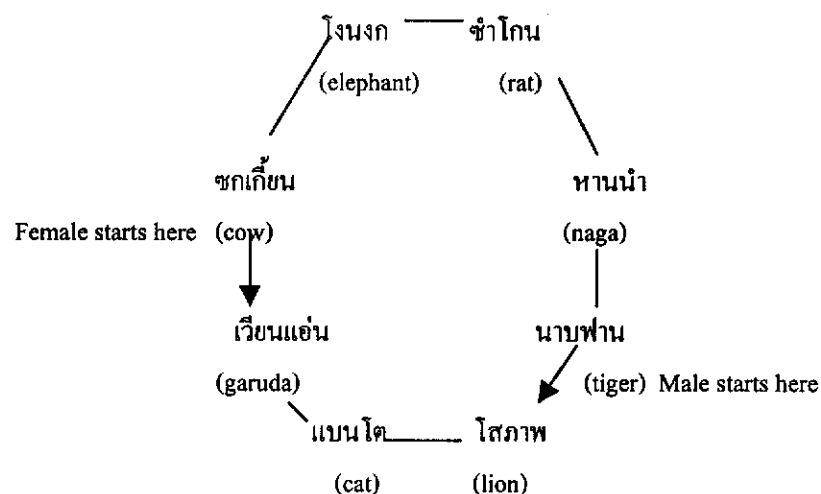
Songkran in Luang Prabang lasts approximately ten days. The essence of this festival is officially set for April 13th. The festival extends over three or four days. Each day has a different focus and activities; Wan Sang Khan Long (the last day of the lunar year), Wan Nao (the day between two years) and Wan Sang Khan Khaun (the first day of the lunar year).

April 13 is the last day of the year or Sang Khan Long, meaning the spirit of the last year is passing by. The people of Lung Prabang are engaging in the preparations for receiving a new spirit coming to live with them for the New Year. The end of the year is combined with the beginning of a new spirit. In an astrological sense, human fate relies upon the movement of the stars, the sun and the moon. Our destiny changes each year when the stars, the sun and the moon start a new journey in the zodiac.

On this day the people of Luang Prabang gather at Don Sai Mung Kun, a bank of the Mae Khong River, to set free the captured animals bought in the morning, and to build a sand pagoda. The sand pagoda originates from a Buddhist belief. It was said that in ancient times people carried sand into their local temple to build a pagoda on Songkran as a means of making merit, as said in a local proverb “Khon Sai Kao Wat.” Today, in most temples there is already a pagoda. The construction of another one is unnecessary. However, people still follow their traditions by building a miniature sand pagoda as a dedication to the Buddha. At the end of the day, hundreds of sand pagodas decorated with candles, flowers, powder and *the flags with a sign of the yearly animals* stand along the Mae Khong River as silent witnessesses to the merit of the believers.

An interpretation of Tua Paung:

A Sign of the Yearly Animals of the Lao Horoscope



Tua Paung is a flag with the signs of eight animals. Having once seen the flag, I was intrigued by these animals printed on it. In this paper I will explore the meanings of the eight animals drawn upon the flag.



Looking at the flag, it can be seen that the animals are printed in vertical order. The top animal is a lion followed by a cat, a Garuda, a cow, an elephant, a rat, a Naga and a tiger respectively. My interpretations for these animals are as follows:

Based upon Brahman astrology, these animals may symbolize the gods who take turns in protecting each day within the week. Each god has his own unique vehicle of transportation. The god of Sunday has a lion as his transportation. The Monday god mounts a horse, Tuesday rides a buffalo, Wednesday has an elephant, Thursday a deer, Friday a cow, and Saturday a tiger. These gods also take a part in association with the nine gods of the planets when combined with Ketu and Rahu. Likewise, the two gods have their particular animal vehicle. Ketu rides a Naga, and Rahu a Garuda.

In Hindu mythology, Rahu and Ketu are demons causing eclipses. In a famous mythological scene called the Churning of the sea of milk, Rahu disguised himself as a

god to steal the elixir of immortality from the gods, and drank it. But he was soon recognized by the Solar and Lunar gods who suddenly reported his misdeeds to Visnu, the Hindu Supreme God. The God did not want any demons to be immortal so he used his weapon to cut off the head of Rahu immediately. It was too late because the elixir had already passed into his throat. Even though his head and body were separated, the elixir made him immortal. Thereafter, Rahu has been portrayed as a serpent's head with a widely open mouth ready to swallow the sun and moon in revenge. His body turned into that of a serpent called Ketu. Since then, Rahu and Ketu have always floated opposite each other in space. They chase the sun and moon across the sky, trying to swallow them. If they should be successful, an eclipse occurs.

In Hindu horoscopes, Rahu and Ketu are called shadow planets in reference to the natural causes of eclipses by the shadow of the moon when passing in front of the sun, and in relation to their mythical characters. When one's destiny falls in the constellation of Rahu or Ketu, it is often considered as a period of bad luck in human life. Many believe that these planets are related to sudden changes, separations, anger, anxiety, losses, death "and other things which we would feel if we got our heads cut off right when we were getting something we wanted" (http://www.astrological.reports.i12.com/rahu_ketu.htm). However, Rahu and Ketu could bring not only ill, but also good fortune to individuals. It simply depends on their position in the astrological chart.

In the Hindu astrological sense the positions of Ketu, Rahu and the other seven planets have a direct influence on our decision-making and behavior causing the ill or good fortune in the future of each individual. On the other hand, the nine gods of the planets are associated with nine directions. The solar god governs the northeast, the lunar god governs the east, Mars governs the southeast, Mercury the south, Jupiter the west, Venus the north, Saturn the southwest, Rahu the northwest, and Ketu the center as depicted in the diagram below.

Rahu Northwest	Venus (Friday) North	Solar God Northeast
Jupiter (Thursday) West	Ketu Center	Lunar God East
Saturn (Saturday) Southwest	Mercury (Wednesday) South	Mars (Tuesday) Southeast

Brahman astrologers consult this diagram, a duplication of the universe, to read a horoscope and to determine the auspicious times of the year.

Tua Paung VS Brahman Astrology

Tao Phaung	Brahman Astrology
Lion	Lion (Solar God)
Cat	Horse (Lunar God)
Garuda	Buffalo (Mars)
Cow	Elephant (Mercury)
Elephant	Deer (Jupiter)
Rat	Cow (Venus)
Naga	Tiger (Saturn)
Tiger	Naga (Neptune)
	Garuda (Pluto)

By comparing Tua Paung with the universal diagram in ancient Brahman astrology, there are six repetitive animals. This should not be merely a coincidence.

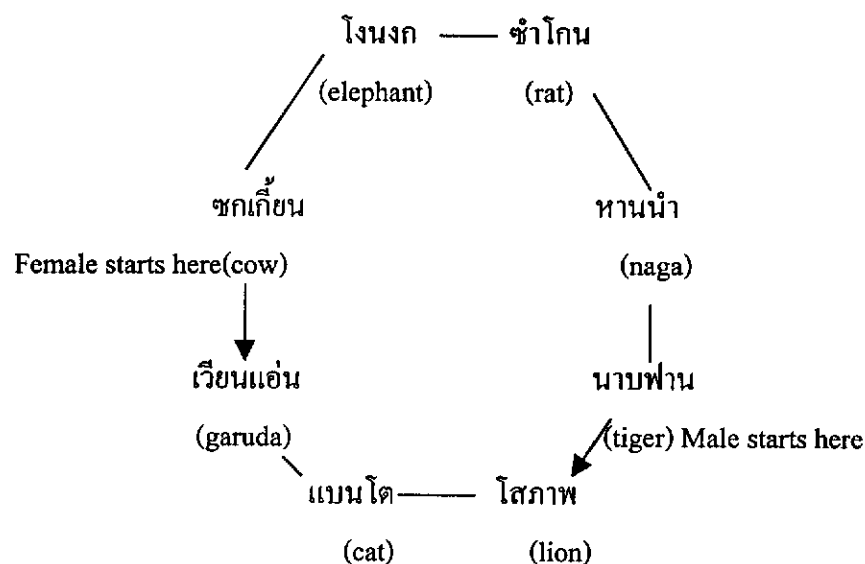
Rather, it is positive to say that Tua Paung is a sign of the Lao horoscope, adopted from India, but has developed to some extent to suit the Lao purview. This is a remarkable example of the Indianization in Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian ancestors adopted the Indian civilization to a great extent, but have also adapted the foreign cultural contexts to fit their own values and worldview.

The Lao recite the animals printed in order on Tua Paung, a flag with the yearly animals of the Lao horoscope, in the form of verse, also found in the Sieng Mien folktales (John Li. Interview. April 18 2001). It can be vertically recited as follows:

Ngon Ngok (โงนงก)	= elephant, ช้าง
Sok Kien (ซกเกี้ยน, ผลักเกวียน)	= cow, วัว
Vien An (เวียนแอน)	= garuda. ครุฑ
Ban To (แบนโต)	= cat, แมว
So Pab (โสภาพ)	= lion, ราชสีห์
Nab Phan (นบฟาน)	= tiger, เสือ
Han Num (หานน้ำ)	= naga, นาค
Sum Kone (ซำโคโน)	= rat, หนู

The term “Paung” itself means “to depend upon.” In this case the Lao depend upon an animal presented on the flag of fortune. To calculate which animal one will rely upon each year is by consulting the circle of the animals below. Women will start

at the cow, then count counterclockwise, and stop at their age. Men will do the same, but they will start at the tiger, and count clockwise. The animal sign in which they fall is the yearly animal upon which they will depend. “*Tua Paung*” can thus be understood as a sign of the yearly animal of the Lao horoscope.



Believing that their fortune relates to their animal of the year, the Lao write their name, surname and birthday on that animal sign, and place flags, or *Tua Paungs*, around a sand pagoda they built at Don Sai Mun Kun on April 13th --the last day of the year. Some people put flags in front of their houses. They believe that they will bring them good luck.

Ordinary people do not have much knowledge of how to consult this animal sign of the horoscope to read their fortunes. In trying to read the animal signs, most people make a basic prediction referring to the personality of the animals. For example, if one’s own age falls at the cow, this year is said to be a year of success.

But he/she must work very hard, as a cow does in the field, or even to confront some important obstacles to achieve his/her success.

Generally speaking, it seems that very few people understand the meanings hidden behind those eight animals. Today, to read one's fortune most fortune-tellers, including some local monks, would rather consult the 12-year cycle with associated animals, widely used in Thai and Chinese cultures, than the sign of yearly animals of the Lao horoscope. The cycle of twelve animal signs starts with the rat, and is followed by the cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, cockerel, dog and pig (or elephant) as shown in the table below.

Year	Shan State	Shan State	Shan State	Shan State
No.	Shan State	Shan State	Shan State	Shan State
1	Shuad	Jai	Jew	Rat
2	Shalu	Pow	Tew	Ox
3	Kahn	Yee	Imm	Tiger
4	Thoh	Mao	Pao	Rabbit
5	Marong	See	Sin	Serpent
6	Maseng	Sai	Jee	Snake
7	Mania	Sa-nga	Njow	Horse
8	Manae	Med	Bee	Goat
9	Wory	Sum	Sin	Monkey
10	Raga	Lao	Iew	Cock
11	Jor	Sed	Shood	Dog
12	Goon	Gai	Hai	Pig*

<http://welcome-to.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/sk-orig.htm>

Like the twelve animal signs in Lanna (Northern Thai Kingdom origin) astrology, the elephant is placed instead of the pig in the Lao twelve-year cycle. However, both Lanna and Lao astrology with these yearly animals is similarly ordered and pronounced. No matter in which languages the cycle is recited, this 12-year cycle with associated animals is in conjunction with the astrological signs of the zodiac, and could thus, have a direct impact on a human life as believed by its followers.

The structure of many old temples built in Southeast Asia had an astrological base in reference to their design and construction. These temples, including all the state mountain temples of Angkor, were built to represent the universe and its astronomical bodies. Like most Southeast Asian countries, the Lao adopted these Brahman astrological and cosmological concepts from the ancient Khmer. The aspect of the position of the sun and its movement into Aries as well as the 12-year cycle in conjunction with the 12 astrological signs of the zodiac are hidden in the construction, design and motifs of Lao local temples. On the western bank of the Mae Kkong River opposite the famous cave of Tam Ting is Wat Pak Ou. Its mural paintings illustrate the signs of the yearly animals of the Lao horoscope and the 12-year cycle with associated animals.



The mural painting of Wat Pak Ou

Even though the meanings of the yearly animal signs of the Lao horoscope seem to have disappeared through time, and remain secret to many people in general, these astrological signs have never lost their sacredness. The astrological sense has

been transmitted through time into the blood of everyone calling himself Ai-Lao, a man belonging to the Lao ethnic groups. Today the Lao still consult horoscopes to find the auspicious days and times for the arrangement of their wedding ceremonies and when moving into a new residence. Some consult the gods of direction in horoscopes to ask for directions toward which they would find their fortunes. On April 13, thousands of flags with the signs of the yearly animals of the Lao horoscope wave over the sand pagodas on the Mae Kong River bank proving the continuity of their sacredness in the long-lasting culture of the Ai-Lao.

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