

Concepts and Symbols in the Merit-Making of 84,000 Dharma: A Study of an Invented Tradition¹

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Abstract

This article aims at studying an invented tradition of the merit-making of 84,000 Dharma at Tha Muang Village, Selaphum District, Roi-Et Province. In 1992, the abbot and the villagers in this community created a new ritual to be held on the full moon day of the third lunar month. Since then, this grand ritual has been an annual tradition of this village temple to create faith in Buddhism. What is particularly interesting are the concepts and the symbolic objects used in the ritual. At the village temple, there is a Buddhist palm leaf manuscript entitled, *Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, meaning 84,000 Dharma code of morality. The abbot re-interpreted and concretized this folk scripture by initiating a ritual with the same name of the scripture. The concept of the ritual was to invent 84,000 pieces of ritual objects, e.g., candles, incense sticks, lotuses, flags, rice, including the invention of certain new ritual objects, and also to have the monks chant the *Paed Muen Siphon Khan* scripture.

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This article will identify the various concepts behind this merit-making, arguing that, in inventing this new tradition, the abbot combines Buddhist concepts with local beliefs. Moreover, this article will analyze the ritual symbols, including both the ritual objects and the ritual acts, and argue that the ritual symbols represent Buddhist Dharma, supernaturalism, fertility and Thai folk life. The merit-making of 84,000 Dharma indicates the role of Buddhism in Thai folk life, and helps to understand a kind of Thai Buddhism that is a syncretism between Buddhism, Brahmanism and the indigenous beliefs in supernaturalism.

Introduction

The villagers in Tha Muang village in Salephum District, Roi-Et Province, Thailand, value the importance of traditional rites, whether they are rites of passage held at the critical times in one's life, fertility rites or calendrical rites. However, as society changes through time, things must be adapted to suit the context of society, including the performance of traditional rites. Therefore, villagers may have to adapt certain rituals to suit the present day objectives, such as the adaptation of traditional rites to serve tourism.

Apart from the adaptation, Tha Muang villagers invented a new ritual in the third lunar month called *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* (บุญแปดหมื่นสี่พันขึ้นขึ้น), the merit-making of 84,000 Buddhist Dharma teachings. This newly invented ritual is interesting in terms of the beliefs and concepts that lay behind the ritual. The primary questions brought in this study are "Did traditional belief count or was it adapted in the making of this new ritual?" and "How and to what extent does the new ritual satisfy the villagers in their current situation?"

The purpose of this article is to analyze the concepts of the newly invented ritual and to explain the way Tha Muang villagers created this ritual. This will be a case study of the dynamism of traditional rites in present day Thai society. I hypothesize that the

merit-making of the 84,000 Dharma at Wat Pasakdaram, Tha Muang village, is an invented ritual constructed from certain Buddhist beliefs and also from certain folk beliefs in fertility; however, the aim of the ritual is to create Buddhist faith for the villagers in the community.

This article will firstly provide the background of the ritual of *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, then will explain the concepts behind this invented ritual, and lastly, analyze the symbols of the ritual objects and the ritual acts.

***Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*: Background of the Invented Tradition**

Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan at Tha Muang village was first held on November 11, 1992 for the celebration of the replica of Phra That Phra Nom (That Phanom Stupa), together with a ceremony of paying respect to the spirits of the ancient teachers and ancestors. Subsequently, these two ceremonies have been held every year in the third lunar month. The person who organizes this event is Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, the abbot of Wat Pasakdaram. The abbot explained that the name of the ritual is derived from the name of a Buddhist palm leaf manuscript entitled, *Paed Muen Siphon Khan*. The patterns of the ritual were adapted from the rituals he experienced when he was young.³

The above explanation for the *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* thus reflects the adjustment of the ritual in the past with the present ritual. This is consistent with the concept of the invention of tradition put forth by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.⁴ They said that the invented tradition tends to transmit traditional values and ritual symbols. This shows the continuation of the past. They further said that the invented tradition is created to respond to new situations, but can also refer to past situations.⁵ The reference to the past situation in

³ Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, February 2009.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵ Hobsbawm, cited in Darin In-Muen, "Concepts of the Inventing Tradition of Eric Hobsbaum," *Journal of Sociology-Anthropology*, 21 (1) (2002): 198-202.

Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan is the background and the name of the ritual.

Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan is difficult to be held because many ritual objects need to be prepared. Before the day of the ritual, villagers have to prepare the ritual ground and cooperate in making the ritual objects. For example, the villagers need to build what they call a “worship tower” (หอนูชา), which is made of bamboo with a square-shaped base, composed of nine levels. In front, there are steps and on the top is the seat for a monk who will read the Buddhist palm leaf manuscript. In addition, villagers have to build 33 towers for worshipping the deities (หอนูชาเทวดา). The ritual objects they have to prepare are: eight jars of sacred water; 108 long flags; 1,000 white tiered umbrellas; 108 each of coconut shoots, banana shoots, sugar cane, and betel nut shoots; eight spools of holy thread; and 4,000 small rice offerings. Furthermore, they have to make 84,000 pieces of other ritual objects which are bamboo baskets, incense sticks, candles, tea leaves used for chewing, triangle-shaped flags, long-shaped flags, rice, lotuses, etc.

The number of 84,000 pieces of ritual objects is derived from the belief in the sacred 84,000 Dharma of the Lord Buddha and based on the *Paed Muen Siphon Khan* manuscript.

The steps of the ritual are divided into three periods: the period of the layman, the folk Brahman of the village and the monk. The ritual starts on the first period of the waning moon of the third lunar month. The participants wearing white walk calmly pass the decorated ritual objects. The layman’s rite begins with the evening prayer. After that, the folk Brahman, who was ordained at Wat Pasakdaram and learned the ritual process from Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, will start the prayer by inviting all the deities:

“.. I would like to proclaim
and invite all deities in heaven...”

After inviting the deities, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, sitting on the “worship tower”, will start to read and chant the *Paed Muen Siphon Khan*. He faces toward the attendants; the attendants putting their hands together in reverence at the chest level until the monk

finishes the chanting. Then he will explain the content of the manuscript to the villagers. This aspect indicates that this ritual teaches Buddhist doctrine, thus the invented tradition also carries on the belief and faith in Buddhism.

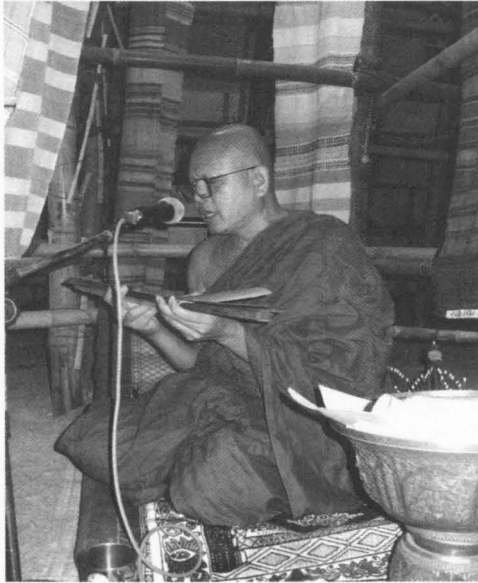


Figure 1: Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon

For example, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon explains that when a sinful person dies, they will go to hell. Since there have been many sinful people, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon estimates that the large copper pot in hell into which sinners are put may have become so full with so many sinners that it has started to leak. Therefore, the monk invented a new tradition by telling the villagers to make ‘metal flags’ to repair the copper pot. In order to make the ‘metal flags’, the villagers have to cut copper in the shape of a flag. By offering the ‘metal flags’ in this religious ritual, the flags will repair the leaking copper pot in hell. The monk also tells the villagers that they can write the names of their relatives who have passed away on the flags

so that the religious merit can be transferred to their relatives who have passed away. This is perceived as a way to transfer merit to the dead ancestors and relatives.⁶ If we analyze this teaching, it can be seen that the monk uses the concept of the Three Planes of the Existence (ไตรภูมิ) to convince the Buddhists to do good, not to do evil and to have a peaceful mind, the basic principles of Buddhist doctrine.

After the chanting and the Buddhist teaching, the monk will lead the villagers to walk three times around the replica of That Phra Nom Stupa. During the three rounds, the monk and the Brahman will chant in order to bless the attendants. After that, the villagers may stay at the temple to observe the Buddhist precepts and attend other rituals held in the third lunar month. When all the rituals have been completed, the villagers will bring the ritual objects home to worship for their auspiciousness.

The Concept of the Making of *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*

In this section, I will discuss the concept of the ritual invention from the Buddhist palm leaf manuscript, the concept of ritual invention from religious syncretism, the concept of the ritual invention of the merit and Karma virtues and the concept of ritual invention for social congregation.

⁶ Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, February 2009.

The Concept of the Ritual Invention from the Buddhist Palm Leaf Manuscript



Figure 2: *Paed Muen Siphon Khan* palm leaf manuscript of Wat Pasakdaram

Apart from using the name of the manuscript, *Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, as the name of the ritual, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon uses the concept of the auspicious number of 84,000 Dharma to make the ritual objects of 84,000 pieces since the idea of this number is generally accepted as an auspicious number in Buddhism. Therefore, the name of the palm leaf manuscript is the origin of the invented ritual which is consistent with what anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn stated, “a legend or a myth is the explanation of the ritual activity.”⁷

Anthropology of religion views that, “a religious system consists of two parts, the abstract and the concrete. The abstract part consists of belief, philosophy and whereas the ritual part concretizes the abstract”.⁸ In this case, the belief in 84,000 as an auspicious number, together with the religious manuscript, is concretized by the invented ritual of *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*. The monk re-interpreted and creatively invented the ritual objects of 84,000 pieces to create faith for Buddhist attendants.

⁷ Siraporn Nathalang, *Theories of Folklore: Methodologies in the Analysis of Myth and Folktales* (Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2005) 335 (in Thai).

⁸ Siraporn Thitathan, *Concepts about Belief and Religion in the Society* (Bangkok: Sukhothai Thammathirat University, 1991) 8 (in Thai).

The invention of the ritual object, the palm leaf manuscript, indicates that Tha Muang villagers made use of the transmitted text in order to create practice and serve the new situation. Andrew Buckser confirms the relationship between texts and social context.⁹ Applying the palm leaf manuscript in the new ritual context indicates that the palm leaf manuscript is not idly kept to be just worshiped by the people, but now has ritual significance in the society. This is consistent with what Malinowski, a well-known anthropologist, said “The texts, of course, is extremely important, but without context, it remains lifeless.”¹⁰

The Concept of Ritual Invention from Religious Syncretism

This concept originates from the complexity of the religious system in Thailand. Thai religious system can be viewed as religious syncretism composed of indigenous beliefs in spirits, Buddhism and Hinduism.¹¹ One may call this phenomena folk Buddhism or popular Buddhism. *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* shows the linkage between Hinduism and Buddhism as the folk Brahman and the Buddhist monk co-exist in the ritual. Moreover, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon binds the Brahman’s hand and blesses the Brahman by saying:

“... this fine bright sacred thread was brought
from Gautama Buddha in heaven.
The thread is for the Brahman, the wise man.
Come and sit on the crystal seat
and bring the people’s khwan here...”

⁹ Andrew Buckser, “Tradition Power and Allegory: Construction of the Past in two Danish Religious Movement,” *Ethnology*, 34 (1995): 257-272.

¹⁰ Malinowski, cited in Siraporn Nathalang, *Theories of Folklore: Methodologies in the Analysis of Myth and Folktales* (Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2005) (in Thai).

¹¹ Kirsch, cited in Siraporn Thitathan, *Concepts about Belief and Religion in the Society* (Bangkok: Sukhothai Thammathirat University, 1991) 17 (in Thai).

After binding the folk Brahman's hand, the monk also anoints the Brahman's forehead to call the *khwan*¹² of the Brahman and to authorize him to further conduct the ritual. Such action reveals the syncretism between Buddhism, Brahmanism and the indigenous belief in *khwan*. This also reflects that the indigenous belief is accepted by Buddhism and vice versa, and that Buddhism has integrated traditional beliefs into a Buddhist ritual.

The Concept of the Ritual Invention from the Belief in the Law of Karma

Buddhist people believe in the Law of Karma, therefore, people conduct merit-making ceremonies to generate and accumulate merit, since by committing good deeds, one will earn good merit. Accordingly, *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* has been invented from this belief. By participating in the ritual, listening to the chanting and sermons of the monks, villagers feel peace at heart and believe that they have gained religious merit.

The Concept of Ritual Invention for Social Congregation

The belief in gaining merit from the ritual causes the community to gather at the temple, thus, creating village social harmony and village unity. This result can be analyzed to be one of the concepts in the invention of this *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*.

Villagers do not just participate in the ritual, they mutually make the ritual possible by helping make the 84,000 pieces of the ritual objects and other kind of ritual objects. The cooperation of Tha Muang villagers is considered as the strength of the community. The unity among them is based on the belief that they migrated from Ban Na Pung Suan Mon, Laos People's Democratic Republic, a relationship which gives them a feeling of mutual alliance, trust and security.

¹² Thais, and also many other Southeast Asians, have an indigenous belief that human beings and things have *khwan* or life force inside the bodies and that *khwan* can leave the body, therefore, there has to be a ritual calling back the *khwan* to one's body.

Symbols in *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*: Interpretation of Their Meaning

In *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, many symbols were invented, both ritual objects and ritual acts.

Symbolic Objects

The invented symbolic objects in *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* include materials representing Buddhist Dharma, supernatural powers, and prosperity.

Buddhist Dharma

In *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, there are 84,000 pieces of invented ritual objects as symbols of the 84,000 Dharma of the Buddha; thus in the ritual, there are 84,000 incenses sticks, 84,000 candles, and 84,000 flags.

In addition, there are other invented objects:

The “worship tower” : a new invention of a nine-tiered tower representing the nine virtues of the Buddha, called *buddhaguna* (พุทธคุณ) in Pali. This tower is used as the place for the monk to sit and preach the Dharma and read the palm leaf manuscript during the ritual. This is regarded as symbolically representing the nine virtues or attributes of the Buddha, e.g., the one who accomplished, awakened, blessed, sublimed, incomparable to others, etc. Each level thus stands for each attribute.

It should be noticed that the creation of symbols is not from the Buddha's physical attributes, but from his *buddhaguna* reflecting his ability and genius. Therefore, the worship tower is a symbol of a sacred space.

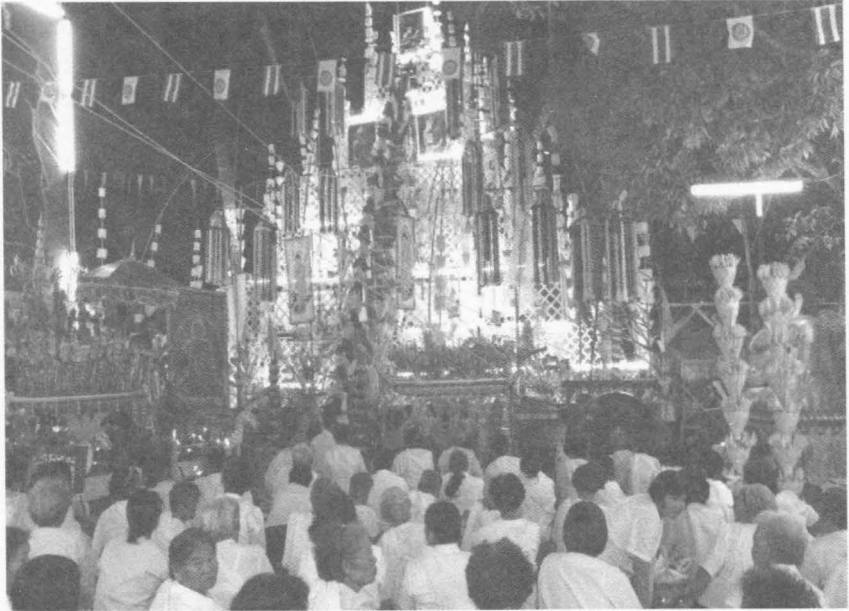


Figure 3: The “worship tower”

Phra Mongkhon Yordkeaw Doungtham (พระมงคลยอดแก้วดวงธรรม): another newly invented symbol, intended as a sacred object made of various kinds of flowers. Each kind of flower symbolizes auspiciousness. From the interview with Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon regarding the importance of the flowers, he said that each kind of the flower is related to the story of Phra Malai who went to heaven to talk with Maitreya Bodhisattva. Maitreya asked Phra Malai whether human beings in the world wanted to meet him; if so, they should decorate their offerings beautifully with flowers, incense sticks, candles and flags. Phra Malai chanting text, the version published by Sor Thammapakdi says:

Whoever wants to pay respect to Maitreya Bodhisattva, let them make an intention to listen to the whole story of Vessantara in one day. Prepare offerings: rice, desserts, flags, incense sticks, candles, and flowers, including all kinds of lotuses.¹³

Although the quotation above appears to be more related to the story of the Vessantara Jataka, Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon applied the scripture to an explanation of why the many kinds of flowers should be used in *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*.

¹³ Sor Thammaphakdi, *Phra Malai Chanting Text, Sor Thammaphakdi Version*. (n.p., n.d.). Translation by the author from the Thai text: ผู้ใดใคร่จะชม สมเด็จพระศรีอาริย์ ให้ตั้งใจให้ชื่นบานฟังนิทานเวสสันดร ถ้าใครจะใคร่วันทา พระศาสดา องค์ชินวร ให้ฟังนิทานเวสสันดร วันเดียวจบครบทั้งกัณฑ์ ฟังบาลีพระเทศนา ฟังคาถากลั่นทั้งพัน ข้าวบิณฑข้ขมนั้น ทุกสิ่งสรรพจงมากมาย จัตรตรงเพดานกัน รูปภาพนันผูกแขวนราย ประทีปรูปเทียนถวาย ดอกไม้เพลิงเรืองรัศมีดอกบัวหลวง ดอกบัวขาว ดอกสามหาว จงกลนี้ ดอกอุบล อันมีสีนี้ลบล ดอกมณฑา ดอกไม้ข้าวบริสุทธ์ ดอกสัตตบุษย์แดงรจนา สิ่งละพัน ถวายบูชา มหาชาติพระเวสสันดร ถ้วนคาถา แลบาลี ผู้ทำดังนี้จบ จึงจะพบท่านด้วยดี จะพบพระโมตริ เมื่อเป็นพระพันประมาณ



Figure 4: Phra Mongkhon Yordkeaw Dountham

Another important element of Phra Mongkhon Yordkeaw Dountham is the *cogon* grass. This kind of grass is used as the cover and is painted in seven colors. The colors represent the color of each of the seven days of the week. An individual would choose the color of Phra Mongkhon Yordkeaw Dountham corresponding to their birth day and bring back one to worship at home. For this reason, Phra Mongkhon Yordkeaw Dountham is created in order that everyone can bring one home to worship after the ritual.¹⁴ For example, people who were born on Monday will take a yellow one to worship.

¹⁴ Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon, February 2009.

Supernatural Powers

Bailey said “All cultures have religions, by which we mean the belief in the existence of supernatural powers and the attempts to influence or control these supernatural powers by the performance of rituals.”¹⁵ In the ritual ground, there are also materials representing the place for supernatural powers. This can be seen in that the ritual performer invites the supernatural power to sacralize the ritual.

“*Devada worship tower*” (หอบูชาเทวดา): of which there are 33, is another invented symbol representing the place for deities. The idea was taken from the belief in the *deva* place in heaven. It is believed that *Daowadueng* [ดาวดึงส์], which is the second level of heaven, means thirty three.

The towers for these devadas symbolize the sacred place where the devadas would come down to the human world to guard and bless the ritual until it is completed. This is to worship the supernatural power for the benefit of the people and society and to provide comfort to the people.¹⁶

Before the day of the ritual, villagers will bring food, desserts, betel nut, and water to put on all 33 devada worship towers. The food and desserts brought to the devadas are to convince the attendants that there are devadas dwelling in the towers. The food and desserts presented are also believed to please the devadas.

¹⁵ Garrick Bailey, *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Boston: West/Wadsworth, 1999) 199.

¹⁶ Sumit Pitiphat, *Religion and Belief of the Black Tai in Sipsongjuthai Vietnam* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 2002) 25, (in Thai).



Figure 5: “Devada worship tower”

Fertility and Prosperity

The symbolic materials representing fertility and prosperity are necessary since the ritual itself has the aim to worship the supernatural power for the sake of all living things in the community.¹⁷ The symbolic materials representing prosperity in *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* relate to the social context of Tha Muang village which is situated on the Chi River. Most of the villagers are rice growers, thus the symbols in the ritual must enhance the prosperity and security for the people.

¹⁷ Victor Turner, cited in Patom Hongsuwan, *Myth and Culture* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2007) 45 (in Thai).

Rice: the symbol of abundance of food: In *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, the villagers use rice and its components for many ritual objects, such as pots of rice spouts put around the ritual ground, 84,000 pieces of dyed molded rice, paddy rice and rice scattered around. It is expected that the supernatural powers and spirits will help bless the rice growing from the beginning until the harvest season. The characteristic of each component of rice symbolizes each production period. The paddy rice means the time before growing, the spouts mean the period during growing and nurturing, milled rice means the period after harvesting and dyed rice means the multi-species of rice.

Apart from using various component of rice as ritual objects, it was found that the large amount of rice used showed the abundance of production and it is possible that they consider it a sort of negotiating with the supernatural powers such that, the more they give, the more the supernatural powers will be pleased and will bless them with prosperity. This shows the relationship between humans and supernatural powers corresponding with what Bailey stated, “supernatural beings take an active interest in worldly affairs, particularly in the lives of human being. Such beings can be asked for blessings or aid, or sometimes they can be commended to do thing or not to do things for people.”¹⁸

Rice container: quantity and prosperity: In the ritual, villagers bring sticky rice containers or *kra tip khao* [กระต๊อบข้าว] to be a part of the ritual objects. The size of the rice containers tend to be huge, but empty, with nothing inside. This reflects that villagers wished to have a plentiful and productive rice harvest. The amount of rice will be equal to the size of the rice containers which tend to be bigger than the normal size used in daily life.

Thus, we can see that the symbols representing prosperity are linked with the life and food of the villagers. Viewing the villagers as food producers, they need psychological security. As food consumers, living conditions in this modern world are uncertainty, there is a struggle for natural resources that can lead to famine. The invention of

¹⁸ Garrick Bailey 201.

symbolic objects in the ritual, therefore, creates peace and security for all the attendants.

Symbolic Acts

Chanting: setting the sacred atmosphere

In *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, the mediators who contact the supernatural powers are Phra Khru Sila Sara Phon and the Brahman. The communicative act is by chanting, with the sound and words generated from the chanting creating the atmosphere of sacredness.

Hitting the drum and gong: creating a powerful and sacred atmosphere

During the praying and chanting, there will be someone who hits the drum and gong rhythmically and the Brahman will say 'continuously hit the drum and gong.' By doing this, the musical rhythm arouses the feeling of the participants. The rhythm of the drum stimulates emotion and the beautiful sound of the gong provides a peaceful feeling. It is believed that the powerful voice is sacred, therefore, it is the way to communicate with the believers as they pass from the profane into the sacred world. The expression of calmness and humbleness by the attendants confirms the result of such a sacred atmosphere which does not happen in their daily life.

At the same time, the sound of the drum and the gong communicates with the supernatural powers. The power of the sound is sent out further than the ordinary man can hear and is powerful enough to reach where the supernatural powers dwell to inform them that the ritual is about to begin. The ceaseless sound of the drum and the gong convey the message to the devadas to come to listen to the chant and the sermon. This indicates that devadas are supernatural powers that are related to Buddhism.

The communication with supernatural powers in *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* is invented and assumed to be used as a form of communication which is a universal act found in every society in the world. This symbolic act is to convince, persuade, and tempt the supernatural powers in many ways to participate in the ritual performance. Thus, in any ritual, symbolic objects and symbolic acts

are required to negotiate and control the supernatural powers for good fortune and the auspiciousness of the community. This is consistent with what Bailey stated, “In general, people performing rituals want supernatural powers to do things on their behalf: to make someone (or everyone) healthy or fertile.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Today, science is rather developed; however, human beings still rely on supernatural powers and rituals. While in the present, Thai society is changing rapidly, Thai people need security in order to live well. Therefore, they ask the supernatural powers to help them by conducting rituals. For this reason, inventing this new ritual, *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan*, is based on the traditional belief in the past, which has been re-interpreted in the current situations, while still maintaining traditional beliefs using new symbolic religious patterns.

The concept of inventing the ritual of *Bun Paed Muen Siphon Khan* corresponds with characteristics of Thai society. Most Thai people believe in Buddhism and practice Buddhism in the form of folk Buddhism. When a new ritual is invented, there is then a combination of Buddhism and supernaturalism. The invented symbols are to represent the Buddha, virtue, merit, and the supernatural powers. Ritual invention, thus, creates confidence for the individuals, as well as for the society at large.

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¹⁹ Garrick Bailey 201.

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