

Prolongation Ritual: Rite of Passage in Lanna Society¹

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Abstract

This article aims to study the prolongation rituals or *seub-chata* [สืบชาติ] in Lanna culture and analyze the traditional Lanna rites of the human life prolongation ritual, the village prolongation ritual, the city prolongation ritual and the modern, river prolongation rites of the Salween River, Mae Hong Son Province and the Chan River, Chiangrai Province. These rites were analyzed using the concepts of “Rite of Passage” by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The research found that the numerous prolongation rituals in Lanna society clearly depict all aspects of the rite of passage as follows: 1) the prolongation rituals carry both actions and reactions to a person’s and community’s change; 2) the prolongation rituals are between religious and non-religious issues; 3) the prolongation rituals are a tradition that enables a person to undergo changes; 4) the prolongation rituals are performed when there is a change from current status to another; and 5) the prolongation rituals are regulated and organized by rules, traditions and norms in the society. Furthermore, the prolongation

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ritual is very meaningful and profoundly significant to Lanna society, especially during and after a critical period, by allowing the community to escape from chaotic and insecure conditions, and return to normality.

Introduction

In Lanna culture, there are several rituals related to life, from birth until death. Among these rituals, interesting and big ceremonies, and quite important to the Lanna people's lifestyle, are the rituals associated with the *seub-chata* [สืบชาติ] or “prolongation ritual”. These rituals continue to play important roles and exist in modern society, such as the city prolongation ritual, which is still being held.

In religious and cultural ritual systems of human beings, there are four rites: 1) fertility rites, 2) healing rites, 3) calendrical rites, and 4) rites of passage. Among these four rites, the rites of passage are the most important and can be found in all types of cultures, since such rites relate to life, from birth until death, including after life management of a person.

The numerous prolongation rituals in Lanna culture reflect the importance of prolongation, which is implicitly important to the life, mind, and spirituality of the Lanna people. As for the objectives of this study, the researcher was interested in analyzing whether different prolongation rituals in Lanna society characterize the rites of passage and how; and why these rituals have been transferred and exist under the changes of modern society. The study framework was based on the concept of rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep, as well as the concept of rites of passage by Victor Turner, which was influenced by van Gennep.

The Prolongation Rituals in Lanna Culture

seub [สืบ], as defined in the Northern Thai Culture Glossary, means “moving out, extending, continually”.³ A prolongation ritual or *seub-chata* [สืบชาติ] means a “rite performance to continue one’s life or even to prolong one’s age and the prolonged age is auspicious and prosperous.”⁴ In Lanna society, there are four types of prolongation rituals: a human life prolongation ritual, a village prolongation ritual, a city prolongation ritual and a rice prolongation ritual.

Sa-nguan Chotisukrat explained the prolongation rites in Lanna Culture that:

a prolongation ritual is a local tradition of Tai Yaun (local) Northern people. This ritual includes a city prolongation ritual, a village prolongation ritual, and a human life prolongation ritual. The reasons for performing these rituals are for auspiciousness, prosperity, and the long lasting of the city or person and this is another auspicious ceremony.⁵

Types of Prolongation Ritual in Lanna Culture

Human Life Prolongation

Srilao Ketprom explained regarding a person’s prolongation that “any person who had committed any wrongdoings, whether physical or spiritual, which caused illness or loss of property, dispute, sorrow, worry, unhappiness, depression. Anyone who experiences one of these circumstances, this is called wicked fortune or broken fortune.”⁶ In addition, the human life prolongation rite will be perform for anyone who gets a promotion, retires and also on the occasion of a birthday anniversary for an elderly person more than 60 years old.

³ Bubpa, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6944 (in Thai).

⁴ Srilao, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6945 (in Thai).

⁵ Sa-ngaun, *Northern Thai Traditions*, 53 (in Thai).

⁶ Srilao, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6947-6950 (in Thai).



Figure 1: Human Life Prolongation Ritual

The Village Prolongation

In many Northern Thai villages located in the rural areas or suburbs, a spiritual house or small wooden house can be found at any junction on the borders of the village. This spiritual house is called *ho sua ban* [หอเสื้อบ้าน] in Lanna. It is a house for the sacred spirits who protect the village and community members with happiness, create fertility and protect from evils or inauspicious things, dangers that might occur to the community. A village prolongation ritual is performed annually before the Buddhist lent period and after the Songkran festival. The Tai people in Lanna (Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Tai Yai, Tai Khun) have to perform this village prolongation ritual before the cultivation season. This is regarded as a big ceremony of the community where all the people participate and help in this ritual and apply their faith, strength, funds, food preparing, seasoning, and alms offerings which is called *hom krua* [ฮอมครัว] This is an activity in making merits through offerings and money. Moreover, the village prolongation ritual has been performed in case of abnormal

happenings in the community; for example, when more than three people died in quick succession, it is believed to be because of some wickedness. The villagers will help perform a ritual to expel the wickedness through the village prolongation ritual.⁷

The City Prolongation Ritual

The city prolongation ritual in Lanna has been performed for decades. It is believed that the city has its own fortune, and sometimes the city's fortune is overlapped by many orbiting planets that can cause misfortune. The people living in that city might be suffering from illnesses, bad karma, or accidents. Therefore, the governor or a high ranked person should help performing this city prolongation ritual in order to extend its existence.⁸

The Rice Prolongation Ritual

The rice prolongation ritual is to welcome the *kwan* [กวน] (an invisible spirit) of the rice. If any families cannot harvest rice sufficiently within a period of one year, it is an unusual circumstance. It is believed that the rice fortune is terrible and short-lived. If the rice prolongation ritual is performed, the paddies will be sufficient to produce.⁹ This type of prolongation rituals is rarely performed in present day Lanna society.

⁷ Manee, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6950-6951 (in Thai).

⁸ Manee, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6951 (in Thai).

⁹ Srilao, *Glossaries of Northern Thai Culture*, 6958 (in Thai).



Figure 2: The City Prolongation Ritual at Hua Lin Fort, Chiangmai City

The Concept of the Rites of Passage

Arnold van Gennep wrote in his article “The Rites of Passage”:

In such societies every change in a person’s life involves actions and reaction between sacred and profane – actions and reactions between regulated and guarded so that societies as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury.¹⁰

The above statement clearly shows his ideas about the rites of passage that they are about actions and reactions of change in a person’s life between sacred and irreligion. In addition, he added: “For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined.”¹¹ This can be interpreted that for everyone, the rites of passage are necessary

¹⁰ van Gennep, *The Rite of Passage*, 3.

¹¹ van Gennep, *The Rite of Passage*, 3.

traditions to enable a person to overcome any chances from one condition to another.

Siraporn Thitathan explained the notion of the rite of passage:

The rite of passage is found in all societies such as ones related to birth, adulthood, marriage, or death. Arnold van Gennep, a German anthropologist, viewed the rite of passage as the social mechanic informing the changes of social status of people in the community. At the ceremony, all relatives, neighborhoods are involved as they are equivalent to the witnesses to the ceremony who acknowledge the changes of social status.¹²

Suriya Rattanakul defined the rite of passage:

Rite of passage is a kind of ceremony which is officially performed by the society and it can be found in any society. Traditionally, this includes both religious and non-religious ceremonies. Non-religious ceremonies include graduation ceremonies, welcoming club members ceremonies, retirement ceremonies, and etc. However, the core of these ceremonies can include religious rites.¹³

Moreover, Suriya indicated that this rite of passage is interesting in that there are a number of rites of passage relating to religions in all parts of the world. It is quite interesting because the religious ceremonies can cope with the person's life in several periods.¹⁴

The term "rite of passage" was defined by van Gennep as a ceremony in which changes have happened to that person, who moved from one world (it might refer to the real world or the society) to another. He mentioned that the rite of passage is comprised of three stages: the first stage is separation, the second stage is boundary, and the third one is reaggregation. Overall, these three stages are called

¹² Siraporn, "Beliefs and Religions in Thai Societies", 30 (in Thai).

¹³ Suriya, *Religious Rituals*, 216 (in Thai).

¹⁴ Suriya, *Religious Rituals*, 216-217 (in Thai).

pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. A person (only one or more) who is undergoing the rite of passage should be disconnected from the former status, then make a self-adjustment during the passage, and finally reaggregate into the new social status. Suriya also explained that “the term “liminal” is derived from Latin which means the doorsill, so it means the status between the two branches.”¹⁵

The characteristics of the rite of passage between the two branches was explained by van Gennep:

The rite of passing between the part of an object that has been halves, or between two branches, or under something, is one of which must, in a certain number of cases, be interpreted as a direct rite of passage by means of which a person leaves one world behind him and enters a new one.¹⁶

Turner described this condition as: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”¹⁷

In conclusion, the betwixt and between positions are neither this nor that, nor pre or post conditions, but they are organized by norms, conventions, or social and traditional commitments.

The Prolongation Ritual as a Rite of Passage

Considering the notion of van Gennep, the prolongation ritual in Lanna culture characterized a rite of passing stages of life, such as birth, ordination, marriage, or death. The prolongation ritual depicts all aspects of the rite of passage as the following:

1) The rite of passage carries both actions and reactions to a person's change. With respect to the life prolongation ritual, the village prolongation ritual, the city prolongation, and the rice prolongation ritual, these ceremonies represent religious ceremonies that reflect changes in a person's life, both individually and

¹⁵ Suriya, *Religious Rituals*, 219 (in Thai).

¹⁶ van Gennep, *The Rite of Passage*, 19.

¹⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

holistically. A prolongation ritual is a ceremony taking place when there are significant changes or a crisis in life, community or the society, or any happenings which cause changes in the lives of the people and the society. The changes include happiness, fertility or difficulties, when there is a critical situation in the society, or disasters threaten lives and properties. Clearly, the prolongation ritual is a ceremony related to actions and reactions to a person's changes.

2) The rite of passage is betwixt religious and non-religious issues. Concerning the explanation of the prolongation ritual in Lanna culture, this is about the unexpected in life, instability in living, uncertainty in a new condition to overcome, worries about obstacles in life, or any losses. These are conditions that motivate a person to perform a ceremony. Sometimes, the ceremony is magically performed, but in detail, religion and sacredness are involved in the ceremony to expel badness or wickedness which shows the betwixt of religious and non-religious conditions.

3) The rite of passage is a tradition that enables a person to undergo changes. From the perspective of the rite, the prolongation ritual is a solution for humans. It is for relieving frustration, stress, worries from disasters that took place. It is also for alleviating levels of anxieties when people are experiencing misfortune or critical situations, as well as to provide less worry about illness and death, including building confidence in living when there is an accident. If the prolongation ritual is performed, wickedness will not occur again until the fortune turns upside down in the future. These aspects reflect the necessity of the prolongation ritual which relies on the faith in magic and Buddhism's power in building confidence in living.

4) A rite takes place when there is a change in a person's life and they move from one world to another. The ceremony is performed when there is a change from current status to another. It can be said that the prolongation ritual takes place when a person has changed their own condition, and changes from one world to another, including changes in the people's life in the society, changes of community and the city as a whole.

5) The rite of passage is regulated and organized by rules, traditions and norms in the society. It is obvious that this ritual is set

up by the society. It is the belief of the Lanna people and their conventions in the society and community. For example, the village prolongation ritual and the city prolongation ritual are important and unavoidable ceremonies.

According to van Gennep and Turner, the rite of passage should possess three stages:

- 1) Separation or Pre-liminal stage.
- 2) Boundary or Margin or Luminal stage.
- 3) Reaggregation or Post-liminal stage.

Another important characteristic of the rite of passage as Turner mentioned is “Betwixt and Between”. As a case study, “the river prolongation ritual” will be discussed. In this case, the villagers applied the ritual for solutions to a life crisis in their personal life and of the community as discussed below.

The Salween River Prolongation Ritual

The Salween River Prolongation Ritual has been held by the Salween Restoration and Development Association and other communities nearby the Salween River in Mae Sa Rieng district and Sob Moey district, in Mae Hong Son Province. The ceremony has rotated between Tha Ta Fang village, Mae Sa Rieng district and Sob Moey village, Sob Moey district as a consequence of the Hutgye dam construction project in Karen state, Myanmar. This ceremony is significant because the prolongation ritual was chosen to be performed as a part of protesting against the dam on the Salween River, as well as the conservation of the Salween River. The 14th of March each year is observed as “International Day of Action for Rivers and Against Dams”, and the river prolongation ritual is performed on this day.



Figure 3: The Salween River Prolongation Ritual at Sob Moey Village, Mae Hong son Province

The Chan River Prolongation Ritual

The Chan River prolongation ritual is organized by Pa Tueng Sub-district Administration Office, Mae Chan District Office, Mae Chan Cultural Council, and Pa Tueng Elderly Club. The ceremony takes place around Mae Chan water sources, A-lu village, in Pa Tueng sub-district. The ritual is to make an apology to the river and the forest for any misconduct – deforestation, sewage or chemicals release into the river which may cause disasters, including floods and drought, or even deteriorated cultivation. This prolongation ritual is a mixture between Tai Yuan and other tribes living in Mae Salong mountain, and Mae Chan river source such as Akha, Mien, La-hu, Lisu and Lua. In addition, in 2012, the forest ordination ceremony was included in this rite.



Figure 4: The Chan River Prolongation Ritual at Pa Tueng District, Chiangrai Province

From observation of these two events, both the Salween River prolongation ritual and Mae Chan River prolongation ritual, of the Mae Chan people, there are three stages in the ceremony according to Turner as follows:

Separation or Pre-liminal Stage: in the case of the Salween River prolongation ritual, the Salween Dam Construction Project proposed by the Myanmar government would affect the way of life among the villages in terms of relocation, and the loss of cultivation territory that is fertile. If they are relocated to other unsecure land, it will be a life crisis and a community crisis for all people living near the Salween River. It is a risk that could lead to insecurity, so the villagers need to perform a ceremony to separate from the previous condition.

The Mae Chan River prolongation ritual is carried out after a disaster, either flooding in the falling season and drought in the summer. The villagers believed that such disasters are caused by actions which obstruct the Mae Chan River. These actions are deforestation of the river sources, sewage and agricultural chemicals released into the river, and the drainage system. These conditions are critical to the villagers; therefore, such a ceremony needs to be performed to separate from the previous circumstance.

The second stage is the Boundary or Margin or Liminal stage. Ceremonies related to magic and Buddhist ceremony are elements in

this rite, such as chanting an incantation, reading a prescription by the head of the ceremony, Buddhist incantations, and Buddhist sermons by monks. Van Gennep described this condition as “the rite of consecration”, which is a rite to respect and originate sacredness upon something and is a part of a new passage as the “territorial passage” or “crossing frontier of divinities”.

The third stage is the Reaggregation or Post-liminal stage. This stage is comparable to rebirth of life and community, including normality restoration. If a person has already undergone this rite, he is reborn or has a new life. In the case of the river prolongation ritual, the river is reborn or revived and is able to give fertility to the community again and nobody can harm the river until bad luck returns.

With respect to the “betwixt and between” status as explained by Turner, the river prolongation ritual is an imitation of a person’s prolongation ritual. This abides with nature and the human body; likewise, nature possesses its own fortunes. A crisis arises in the community, and the forest and the river is similar to failing fortune. This could also refer to the betwixt and between two conditions: misfortune and good fortune. We can say that in people’s views, these situations mean betwixt and between auspicious and inauspicious conditions. This condition clearly matches the condition of “Betwixt and Between”.

The prolongation ritual at the community level will be performed at a critical period, of chaos, disorder, insecurity or an imbalance in nature. As van Gennep and Turner explained, these conditions are the margin or marginal in which the prolongation ritual can allow the community and nature to escape from this margin, and return to normality.

Summary

The prolongation ritual in Lanna culture is very meaningful and profoundly signified and is not only a magic ceremony with supernatural power as generally perceived. This ritual is very important to the way of life of the Lanna people as it is a rite of passage and an important ceremony to their lives.

The prolongation ritual represents another aspect of Lanna culture which takes supernatural power into account and integrates beliefs and magical ceremonies, and beliefs and Buddhist ceremonies in religious syncretism. It is an integration of beliefs and several ceremonies into the same religious system. It is a form of religious mechanics to control the society and social organizations that enforce the collaboration of people in the society for the sake of its security and fertility.

The prolongation ritual in Lanna culture also reflects the characteristics of its culture emphasizing the insecurities in life, community and nature. Living in dangerous circumstances, especially natural disasters or social changes, it is necessary to build a system to solve this insecure condition. Therefore, the prolongation ritual as a rite of passage has been carried on to the present despite advanced technologies.

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