

New Year “Countdown” Chanting Ceremony in Contemporary Thai Society: An Analysis of an Invented Tradition¹

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Abstract

This study investigates the New Year countdown chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimon Mangkharam. Findings show that the ceremony reflects an invented tradition of reproduction of a ceremony in Thai society. That is, the traditional chanting in the auspicious occasion of the new year has been transformed to the Noppakhro chanting – chanting for prosperity and longevity in life. This Noppakhro chanting ceremony has not been conducted according to the tradition. In the past, this chanting ceremony was held on the special occasion for an individual person. However, this reinvented Noppakhro chanting is now open to the general public. This reinvented New Year chanting ceremony also uses symbolic objects to represent the Noppakhro, symbolic actions to represent reverence of the

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people for the Noppakhro deities, and symbolic space to represent the universe, which is a hypothetical habitat of the Noppakhro deities. In addition, the New Year chanting ceremony that integrates the Noppakhro chanting plays a role in boosting the morale of Thais in the context of capitalism and materialism in modern Thai society.

Introduction

Since the transition to the 20th century, Thais started to celebrate New Year's with a countdown celebration, especially at the square in front of Central World Shopping Center. Interestingly, the Buddhist world in Thailand also started to hold a New Year countdown chanting ceremony (พิธีสวดมนต์ข้ามปี) for prosperity in life during the countdown period on New Year's Eve. At first, this ceremony was not popular, usually held at a few royal temples in Bangkok. Since 2011, the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand and the Department of Religious Affairs have had a campaign for the New Year chanting ceremony to attract Buddhists nationwide. Thus, today temples in Thailand in almost every region hold the New Year chanting ceremony.

At Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimon Mangkhilaram (henceforth Wat Phra Chetuphon), the New Year chanting ceremony was first organized by Phra Dhammarajanuwat (กมล โกวิโท, หลวงเตี้ย), former abbot of Wat Thai Temple in North Hollywood, California. He started to introduce chanting of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (ธัมมจักกัปปวัตตนสูตร) on New Year's Eve in Thailand to replace New Year celebrations as an activity to reunite Buddhists who used to live in the United States. This New Year's Eve practice was performed at Wat Thai Temple before. The ceremony was held at Monk's Residence North Group No. 16 (คณะ น.16) of Wat Phra Chetuphon. Around 2002, the monks of Wat Phra Chetuphon combined the Noppakhro chanting (พิธีสวดนพเคราะห์), which has long been conducted at the temple, with the New Year chanting ceremony. This activity has now become an annual ceremony of the temple. The traditional Noppakhro chanting ceremony was held

privately for a birthday anniversary. The ceremony includes a worship of nine deities that are made up of seven deities associated with birth dates, Rahu (พระราหู) – the deity that brings inauspiciousness to life – and Ketu (พระเกตุ) – the deity that brings good luck. Thus, from that year onward, Wat Phra Chetuphon’s New Year chanting ceremony has changed from the chanting of Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta to the Noppakhro chanting to worship the nine deities.

In this study, the researcher conducted a case study of the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon as an invented tradition. The researcher analyzed the ritual symbols, including the symbolic objects, the symbolic actions and the symbolic space. In addition, the researcher studied the context of the ritual and the function of the New Year chanting ceremony that combines the Noppakhro chanting at the present.

Background

Thais in the past called the New Year’s Eve “Wan Trut [วันตรุษ],” which is the last day of the lunar calendar, in the second fortnight of April. “Trut” means cut or off. In this case it means the end of the year. On that day, a ceremony is held called “Sampatcharachind [สัมพัจฉรฉินท์],” a festive ceremony for the prosperity of the passing year and for preparing to do good deeds in order to experience good things in the coming year.³ Ceremonies during New Year’s Eve, therefore, are aimed at casting off inauspiciousness,⁴ or bad luck that happened in the past year, and at creating auspiciousness in the coming year. The Sampatcharachind ceremony was more of a religious ritual. That is to say, in the ceremony, while monks were chanting the Atanatiya Sutta to cast off the power of evil spirits and obstacles, the audience would hold a holy yarn. Holding the holy yarn symbolized taking auspiciousness into their life; there was also gunfire to cast off the evil spirits and inauspiciousness.⁵

³ Suphapan, *Customs and Traditions from the Sukhothai Period to the Middle Ayutthaya Period*, 285.

⁴ Phaddhakorn, *The Auspicious Ceremonies of 12 Months*, 186.

⁵ Suphapan, *Customs and Traditions from the Sukhothai Period to the Middle Ayutthaya Period*, 286-287.

On December 24, 1940, the government of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram announced January 1 would be the New Year day.⁶ Thus, the night of December 31 became more important for Thais as it marks New Year’s Eve. Thais not only started to accept the internationally accepted New Year, but also to celebrate similar to other countries, such as throwing a party with relatives and friends and gathering before the midnight of New Year’s Eve for countdown which is held in many places.

Since 2011, in addition to all types of celebrations held on the night of December 31, the New Year chanting has become popular. Many temples have held the Noppakhro chanting on the night of December 31 continuing to the first day of the new year. Another interesting point is that the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (THPF) has organized the New Year chanting activity under the name “New Year Chanting: A Good Start, a Good Life.” THPF publicizes the activity through different media, such as television, radio, and newspapers, and social networking sites, such as Facebook. This has attracted more people to chant during on New Year Eve’s night.

In addition to the interesting form of the activity and good publicity from different media, the number of venues that hold the ceremony has increased as well. In 2012, THPF reported that the New Year chanting ceremony was held at 208 places in 61 provinces. The province that the ceremony was held the most was Bangkok, with 56 places holding the ceremony in 2011.

Owing to the publicity from different parties and the interest of almost every province in holding the New Year chanting ceremony, the number of people who participated in this chanting ceremony on the night of December 31, 2012 continuing to January 1, 2013 was higher than in previous years. The increase was noticeable, particularly at provincial temples that were the center of the ceremony in each province. Each provincial temple had 3,000-5,000 attendees on average. For the temples of 878 districts, each temple had 2,000-3,000 attendees on average. Each sub-district temple had 1,000-2,000 and a village temple had 1,000-1,500 attendees on average. On the night of December 31, 2012, the total

⁶ Thanakit, *The Important Days of Thailand*, 17.

number of people who attended the New Year chanting ceremony nationwide was reported to be approximately 30 million. This number is almost half of the total population of Thailand, noted Nopparat Benjawatananun, Director of the National Office of Buddhism.⁷

For the New Year chanting ceremony at major temples, such as Wat Phra Chetuphon and Wat Saket, the Noppakhro chanting is combined so that the attendees are more attracted to it. Since the mantras explain the merit that the chanters will receive, the New Year chanting has gained high popularity.

Wat Phra Chetuphon has organized the New Year chanting for over ten years, and after 2002, the Noppakhro chanting has been included. This makes the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon unique and considered the pioneer in transforming the individual ritual of the Noppakhro chanting to a ritual open to the public.

Due to its significant popularity, this research explored the change in the form of the ceremony of the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon, to discover why today there is an extremely high number of attendees. In addition, the symbolization process that includes symbolic objects, symbolic actions and symbolic space was investigated, along with; the context and function of the New Year chanting ceremony that combines the Noppakhro chanting in the modern Thai society was studied. The data was collected on the night of December 31, 2011 to January 1, 2012 and the night of December 31, 2012 to January 1, 2013.

Symbols in the New Year Chanting Ceremony

The New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon is an invented tradition that was recently started according to Phra Maha Udom Uttamo, Secretary of the Study Tour Division of Wat Phra Chetuphon:

The initial New Year chanting ceremony was just an ordinary chanting regularly conducted on an auspicious occasion. It was held at the North Residence No. 16. The person who initiated this was Phra Dhammarajanuwat, former Abbot of Wat Thai Temple in North Hollywood and former Assistant Abbot of Wat Phra

⁷ Krungthep Thurakit, 2013.

Chetuphon. At that time it was only general mantra chanting and Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta chanting for Thais who used to live in the United States to do activities together at the night of New Year’s Eve. After Phra Dhammarajanuwat passed away, the current Abbot, Phra Dhammapanyabodi, saw its importance. Thus, he started to make it a regular temple’s activity from 2002 onwards. The activity also combined the Noppakhro chanting, a merit-making activity for longevity of the monks at the temple, which has been done since the term of Phra Dhammasenaneer who passed it on to Phra Dhammapanyabodi, the current Abbot.⁸

Thus, the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon is a combination of two ceremonies: the New Year chanting ceremony following Phra Dhammarajanuwat and the Noppakhro chanting ceremony, which has been performed since the time of Phra Dhammasenaneer (พี่ ปุณณโก) passing it on to Phra Dhammapanyabodi (ถาวร ตีสถานุกิจ), the current Abbot. The Noppakhro chanting was added later in order to attract people to go to the temple and to provide an alternative for the New Year celebration, creating merit for and boosting the morale of the attendees.

Symbols in the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon include symbolic objects, symbolic actions and symbolic space, all reflecting a belief in supernatural powers. This belief can be observed from the fact that all attendees have to sit under a holy yarn net connected from the altar of the Noppakhro and from the Buddha image in the Phra Ubosot. They also need to tie the holy yarn to their head as they believe that the holy yarn will be the medium in bringing the holy power to their body.

The Noppakhro chanting included in the ceremony creates participation and a holy atmosphere. The role of the Noppakhro chanting has evolved from the original purpose of warding off inauspiciousness and creating auspiciousness for one particular person, to a new purpose of creating happiness and auspiciousness to all the attendees during the transition to the new year. This has made the

⁸ Interview, Phra Maha Udom Panyabho, personal communication, 26 March 2013.

ceremony very popular today because the ceremony creates mental assurance for the attendees that they will experience good things in the coming year and leave all inauspiciousness behind with the passing year.

Symbolic Objects

Symbolic objects found at the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon include symbols representing deities and offerings for the deities.

Symbols Representing Deities

Symbols representing deities found at the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon are Buddha images that represent the seven days of the week, Noppakhro statues, and colors of Butpalee for the Noppakhro.⁹

Buddha Images Representing Noppakhro

Using a Buddha image that represents the day of the week on which a worshipper was born to represent a deity of the Noppakhro is according to astrological beliefs. The characteristics of the planets representing the nine deities of Noppakhro are explained by Buddha images in different postures and by personalities of people who were born on the corresponding days. Phraseelajarnphiphathana (แจ่ม ฐวโภ) cited an explanation of Somdej Phraphutkosajarn (อยู่ ญาโณทโย).

As for the designation of Buddha images in different postures to correspond to the deities of the seven days of the week, Somdej Phraphutkosajarn (Yu U-Tayo) from Wat Saket explained that it is based on the basic characteristics of those planets.¹⁰

The Sun (Sunday) represents fire or heat that everybody needs. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Thawai Net (seven days gazing) posture. This image has open eyes, representing no blinking for seven days. Eyes are believed to have the fire element. When that person worships fire, he will realize that fire has both benefit and harm. The user needs to realize the value of fire, using it with wisdom.

⁹ Butpalee [บัตรพาลี] is a container made of a banana trunk that contains offerings.

¹⁰ In Thai, the names of seven planets in the solar system are used to call the seven days of the week.

The Moon (Monday) represents happiness. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Ham Yati (pacifying the relatives) posture. The image represents the scene in which the Lord Buddha pacified the Koliya and Sakaya families who were fighting over water for agriculture so severely that a war almost occurred.

Mars (Tuesday) represents anger. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Sai Yat posture, which is a reclining Buddha. Those who are angry can suppress their anger by sleeping.

Mercury (Wednesday) represents knowledge or wisdom that indicates confidence. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Umat (holding an alms bowl) posture. The Lord Buddha always contemplated advantages and disadvantages of places to go on an alms round.

Jupiter (Thursday) represents a stable mind, considered to be teachers or seniors. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Samadhi (the meditating Buddha) posture that shows a stable mind and mindfulness in every moment.

Venus (Friday) represents love and sweetness, considered a passionate mind. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Ram Pueng (contemplating Buddha) posture. This means mercy for animals; the Lord Buddha was passionate for teaching them.

Saturn (Saturday) represents distress or a sad mind. The people born on this day worship the Buddha image in Pang Nak Prok (protected by the Naga king) posture. The image represents the scene in which the Lord Buddha was in a blissful state of mind after reaching nirvana near Mujalin trees. There was a heavy rain, and a naga protected him from the rain. This action represents help to release distress or to overcome obstacles. Also, the word Saturn in Thai is the name of the naga which matches the image with a naga.

Rahu is inauspiciousness that represents incongruity, not fitting in. Those who live during Rahu time – night of Wednesday – must be watchful of their actions, words and mind. They should not get into a fight. They should learn from the Lord Buddha that even though he could do anything, he still tried to avoid inauspicious events, letting the inauspicious events pass by and the situation will turn good eventually.

Ketu represents the best. People worship the Buddha image in Pang *maravichai* (victory over evil) posture. This means absolute conquest; no one can be compared.¹¹

From the above, it can be concluded that using Buddha images that represent the days of birth in the New Year chanting ceremony shows the application of astrological beliefs to Buddhism. Buddha images in different postures that represent the days of the week are employed to represent the Noppakhro.



Figure 1: Buddha image in Pang Ram Pueng posture representing Venus (Friday).

¹¹ Phra Seelajarnphiphathana-Jam Thuwapho, *A brief history of Wat Phra Chettuphon*, 67-69.

Colors of the Noppakhro

In the New Year chanting ceremony, offerings in nine colors are prepared to symbolize the nine deities of the Noppakhro. Candles and flowers of Butpalee in different colors are used. The order of chanting is as follows:

Surya (Sun)	Red candles and flowers
Chandra (Moon)	Yellow or white candles and flowers
Mangala (Mars)	Pink candles and flowers
Budha (Mercury)	Green candles and flowers
Shani (Saturn)	Purple candles and flowers
Guru (Jupiter)	Orange candles and flowers
Rahu	Black candles and flowers
Shukra (Venus)	Blue candles and flowers
Ketu	Golden candles and flowers

The use of different colors to represent the nine deities shows that colors influence the body and mind of human beings. The response of human beings to colors is based on instincts, acquired knowledge and experience. When seeing colors, the brain processes the input and expresses reactions through the mind and emotion. Thus, colors are believed to have an impact on the body and mind.¹²

¹² Mizuo, *Colors and Color Perspective*, 15.



Figure 2: Picture of Nopphakhro deities

From a psychological perspective, the concentration of light and colors can stimulate feelings and emotions. When seeing colors, the eyes will send signals to the brain that creates different feelings according to the influence of the colors, such as cheerfulness, anxiety, calmness, or excitement. Human beings are always involved with colors because everything around us has color. Piyakamolnirun explains the importance of colors for humans: “Colors are crucial for our ways of life from the ancient period up until now. We use colors symbolically to represent certain things.”¹³

¹³ Natthatida, *Influence of Colors*, 5.

Considering the use of the colors symbolically to represent the nine deities of the Noppakhro in the New Year chanting ceremony, we can see that colors are connected to the basic feelings and emotions of human beings. The nine colors represent feelings in different situations at a certain periods of time. Thus, symbolically using the nine colors that represent human feelings in the New Year chanting ceremony makes the Noppakhro chanters feel good because they have released their imbalanced thoughts and feelings through the use of nine colors in the ceremony.

Offerings for the Noppakhro

Offerings in the New Year chanting ceremony for the Noppakhro can be divided into two types: savory foods, such as common snakehead fish with dressing, a boiled pig’s head, poached chicken, boiled shrimp; and sweet foods and fruit, such as boiled taro, yams in coconut milk, Thong Yip, Thong Yod, Foy Thong, jackfruit, and pomelo. In general, these foods are used as offerings for the house spirits and holy spirits in auspicious ceremonies.

Interestingly, the offerings for the Noppakhro are prepared according to the personalities and characteristics of the Noppakhro deities. These deities can be divided into two groups: the deities that bring auspiciousness and the deities that bring inauspiciousness. The deities in the former group are merciful and gentle – Chandra, Budha, Guru, and Shukra. These deities are called “Subahakhro [สุภเคราะห์]”. Thus, their offerings are sweet foods. There is no killing of living beings to prepare the foods that goes with the personalities of these auspicious gods. The deities in the latter group are merciless and aggressive – Surya, Mangala, Rahu, and Shani. These deities are called “Papakhro [ปาศเคราะห์]”. Thus, their offerings are savory foods. Boonlert Shangsiri, an astrologer who organizes the regular ceremony of Pak Nam Shrine in Samut Prakarn, explained the preparation of the offerings for the Noppakhro deities:

Deities of the two groups have different personalities. Chandra, Budha, Guru, and Shukra are good deities who have beautiful appearance or who are priests. They are merciful and do not want to destroy lives, so they eat only sweet foods. However,

Surya, Mangala, Rahu, and Shani have a big strong body with intimidating power. They are warriors who are merciless. They are satisfied with the metallic smell of blood. Thus, their offerings must be savory foods made of meat such as poached chicken, a boiled pig's head, snakehead fish.¹⁴



Figure 3: Savory foods, sweet foods and fruits

It can be concluded that the offerings in the New Year chanting ceremony reflect the needs of human beings. They offer foods to the merciful gods who will bring auspiciousness and good luck and to the merciless gods who will stop bad luck. This all will lead to a happy life in the coming year.

¹⁴ Interview, Boonlert Shangsiri, personal communication, 17 March 2013.

Symbolic Behavior

The following behavior of the organizers and attendees of the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon were observed:

The Host: The Noppakhro Deities Communicators

The host is the one who leads the chanting ceremony. Sometimes the host calls himself an astrologer (โหรา). This person can be a monk, a Brahmin, or an educated person who knows how to lead the Noppakhro chanting ceremony.

The New Year chanting ceremony requires the worship of gods according to the practice in Hinduism. The astrologer is the one who chants to beckon the Noppakhro deities. He sequences the steps of the ceremony and decides the times when to beckon the deities and when to send them back. The duty of the astrologer reflects his role as a communicator between the ceremony attendees and the Noppakhro deities. He is the one who leads the attendees in chanting the Three Jewels and the Five Precepts, beckons the deities and blessing the attendees at the end of the ceremony.



Figure 4: The host

The fact that the host or the astrologer communicates between the deities by beckoning them to accept the offerings and the attendees by blessing them shows that he is accepted as a special person above other human beings. He can communicate with gods. In addition, the host has a role of supervising all the steps in the ceremony and has power in controlling the behavior of the attendees in the ceremony.

Monks: The Symbols of the Noppakhro Deities

In the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon, nine monks sit in the middle of the Ubosot chanting, while other monks sit at different positions around the Ubosot according to the positions of the eight deities. The host monks sit in the center and the monks who chant for the nine Noppakhro deities sit according to the eight positions facing the Ubosot where all the attendees are inside. The arrangement of the seating positions represents symbolic actions that have different dimensions. That is, the monks in the center represent Ketu and his disciples. The monks sitting in the eight positions represent the eight deities and their disciples. In addition, the arrangement of the seating of the monks reflects the belief in the eight Arahants in Buddhism. The monks who sit at the eight positions represent the Etathakkha (master) disciples at the eight positions during the Lord Buddha's time:

Kaundinya	At the east
Mahakassapa	At the southeast
Sariputta	At the south
Upali	At the southwest
Ananda	At the west
Kwampati	At the northwest
Maudgalyayana	At the north
Rahula	At the northeast

Thus, the seating arrangement of monks in the New Year chanting ceremony reflects the beliefs in the Noppakhro deities in the universe. The monks sitting around the Phra Ubosot are compared with the Noppakhro deities around the universe. Sometimes the positions of these deities are replaced by the Etathakkha disciples.

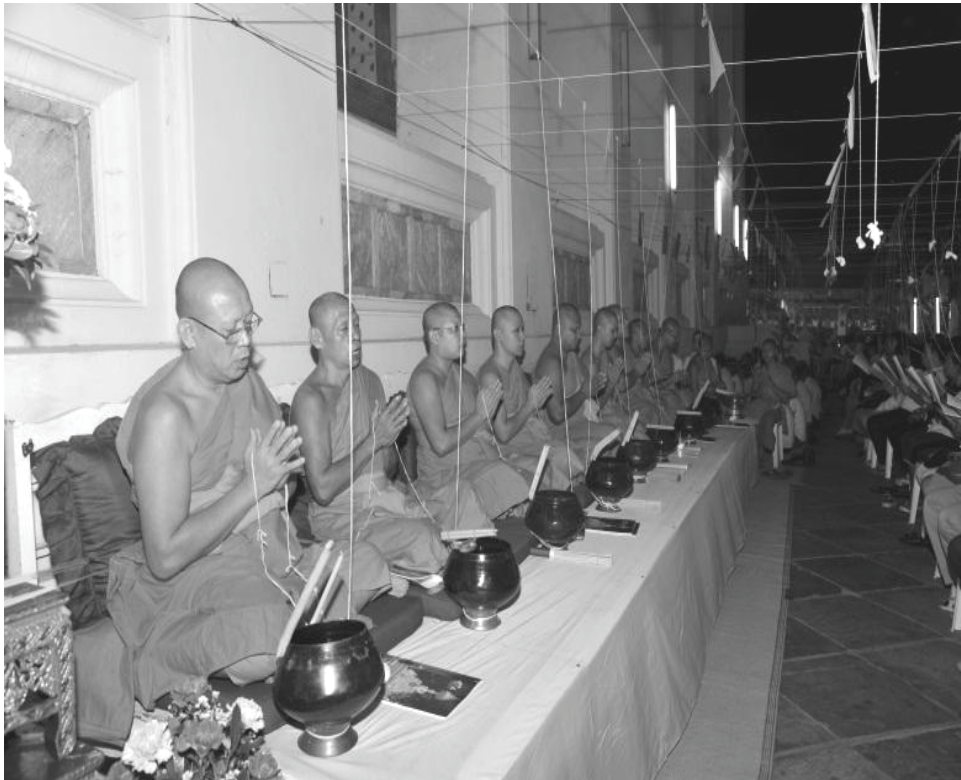


Figure 5: The monks representing the Noppakhro deities and the Etathakkha disciples.

Behaviors of the Ceremony Attendees

The behavior of the ceremony attendees are both related to the requirements of the ceremony and from their own voluntary mind:

Tying the holy yarn to the head: A symbol of connecting the power of the Noppakhro deities to the attendees

In the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon, a holy yarn comes from a Buddha image, passing the chanting monks, and another yarn comes from the altar of the Noppakhro deities. Both yarns, then, are combined in one, and a net above the attendees is made of that yarn covering the whole ceremony area. There are also loose holy yarns hanging down from the net that the attendees use to tie to their head or hold while chanting.

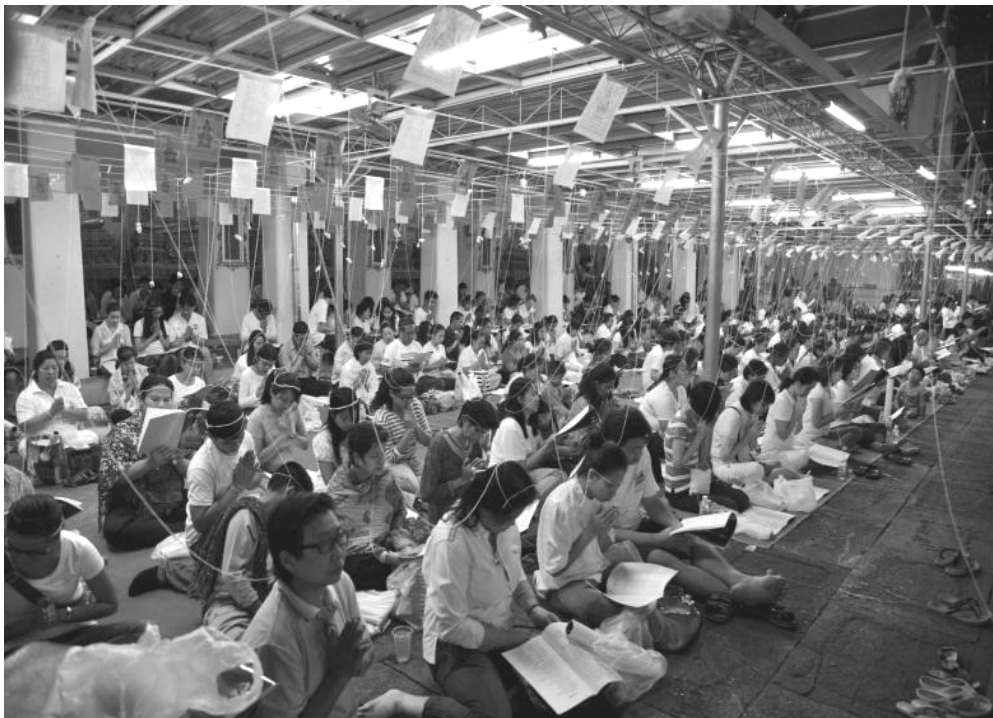


Figure 6: Tying the holy yarn to the head.

It can be said that the holy yarn that connects the altar of the Noppakhro deities is a medium that passes on the holiness to the attendees. It is believed that the attendees receive special power from the ceremony because the monks and the altar of the Noppakhro deities represent the holiness harmony of Buddhism mantras and celestial mantras. This action between the attendees and the symbols in the Noppakhro chanting ceremony is a simple message that the ceremony organizers send to the attendees. The holy yarn is a symbol of the medium that connects the attendees to the universe, and the yarn is used to map the border of the universe. The holy yarn also creates purity by warding off bad luck and starting a new universe or new life with auspiciousness.

White attire: A symbol of transition and purity

The researcher noticed that the attendees of the New Year chanting ceremony usually wear white. This can be analyzed that white is a color of purity and a transition to a new beginning. Especially in Thai society, wearing white represents auspiciousness and purity. The color of the

attire is involved in almost every ceremony concerning transitions and auspiciousness, such as the white attire of the novice (a person who is about to become a monk), white attire when observing the Eight Precepts and white attire on Buddhist holidays.

All the attendees of the New Year chanting ceremony have the same purpose – to ward off bad luck and inauspiciousness and bring in auspiciousness to their life. Thus, white attire is a symbol of transition from bad to good luck in life. The white attire also implies that the wearers are purer than others and ready to receive blessings from the Noppakhro deities.



Figure 7: White attire of the attendees.

Sticking joss sticks into offerings: A symbol of sending the offerings to the gods

In the New Year chanting ceremony, offerings are prepared. A representative attendee will stick joss sticks into all the offerings. If it is

hard to stick them, the joss sticks need to be placed on the offerings. Sticking joss sticks is an important step of the ceremony. If joss sticks are not stuck into the offerings, the monks cannot beckon the Noppakhro to the ceremony. An elaboration on this is from an interview with Phrakru Arkomsoonthorn: “To perform the ceremony, all the offerings need to have joss sticks on them. You need to stick joss stick into any food you want the gods to accept. No matter if the offerings are many or not, they need to have joss stick so that the gods can eat them and then they can be beckoned to the ceremony.”¹⁵



Figure 8: Sticking joss sticks into offerings.

¹⁵ Interview, Phrakru-Arkomssoonthorn, personal communication, 16 December 2013.

The action is paying tribute to the gods. Joss sticks are the symbol of communication because the smoke from the joss sticks goes up in the air. Sathiankoset explains: “Burning incense for fragrant smoke means sending signals to gods in heaven because the smoke goes up and tapers off in the sky which is the residence of gods.”¹⁶

Symbolic Space

The ceremonial area of the New Year chanting at Wat Phra Chetuphon represents the universe. First, the ceremony is performed in the Ubosot, which is symbolized as the center of the universe according to the religious belief of the Tribhumi (hell, earth and heaven). Next, the Butpalee positioning of the Noppakhro deities models the universe according to the positions of the planets in the solar system of Hinduism. Finally, the Butpalee of Chao Krung Palee, in a square shape, and the Butpalee of the guardian spirit, in triangle shape, are symbols of the universe according to traditional Thai belief. Adrian Snodgrass explains the interpretation of the layout of the universe from square and triangle shapes as follows: “If two triangles are put side to side to make a square, the fourth angle will be right across from the first one. This shows that human beings that have absolute singularity are a reflection of the universe.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Sathiankoset, *Traditions About Life*, 33-34.

¹⁷ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 258.



Figure 9: Phra Ubosot is symbolized as the center of the universe.



Figure 10: The Butpalee positioning of the Noppakhro deities



Figure 11: The Butpalee of Chao Krung Palee and the Butpalee of the guardian spirit.

From what has been presented in this section, it can be concluded that symbolization in the New Year chanting ceremony is a reflection of the universe. The symbolization includes beliefs about the universe in the Buddhism society as the universe according to the religious belief of the Three Worlds (hell, earth and heaven), beliefs about the universe influenced by Hinduism as the positions of Butpalee for the Noppakhro deities according to the positions of the planets, and the traditional beliefs in Thai society about life and ancestors as the Butpalee of Chao Krung Palee in a square shape, and the Butpalee of the guardian spirit in a triangle shape. All the three beliefs of the universe are tied as one with a holy yarn.

The Role of the New Year Chanting Ceremony

The New Year chanting ceremony has two roles: to increase psychological security and as a reflection of the dynamics of an invented

tradition. Both of these roles illustrate the needs of Thais nowadays in the capitalist society in which people are not economically stable, so they are also less mentally secure. The New Year chanting ceremony, thus, is an invented tradition used to increase the psychological security of Thais in the modern society.

The New Year chanting ceremony serves psychological needs. This role is present at both the individual and societal level. In Thai modern society, there have been many crises that are beyond the control of human beings, such as natural disasters or instability of economy and society. This makes modern life have more risks.

The New Year chanting ceremony reflects the dynamics of an invented tradition and is held for auspiciousness, as can be seen from the title of the activity held by THPF: “New Year Chanting: A Good Start, a Good Life.” The ceremony also has chanting by the monks and the attendees. The ceremony and all the behavior make this a ceremony that can build psychological security for the attendees. The attendees feel the holiness and are fulfilled with auspiciousness that they believe they will receive. Also, while attending the ceremony, they can make wishes, even though it is not certain if what they wish for will come true or not. The New Year chanting ceremony is a starting point of hope for auspiciousness.

Concluding Remarks

It can be concluded from this study that the New Year chanting ceremony at Wat Phra Chetuphon is a model for the New Year chanting ceremony in modern Thai society. Wat Phra Chetuphon decided to integrate the Noppakhro chanting ceremony into the activities in order to attract more people. The attendees expect to experience happiness, auspiciousness and wealth. Symbols of the Noppakhro chanting found in the New Year chanting ceremony can serve the psychological needs of the attendees. In addition, when Wat Phra Chetuphon’s New Year chanting ceremony, integrated with the Noppakhro chanting, became popular, the New Year chanting ceremony, in general, also gained popularity such that government organizations started to provide support. Also, the Noppakhro chanting, which is part of the New Year chanting

ceremony, started to be held more as a stand alone chanting ceremony on many other occasions.

It can be seen that the New Year chanting ceremony is an invented tradition which corresponds to the dynamics of a modern capitalist society. The role of the ceremony can be seen from the fact that the attendees want not only auspiciousness and psychological security, but many of them also want to have a wealthier life. Thus, the organizers of the New Year chanting ceremony hold the ceremony to serve the market's demand, which is the attendees.

If one considers the components of the New Year chanting ceremony, we find that this is newly invented according to the New Year celebration in the Western countries. When the ceremony gained more popularity, the government started to support the ceremony to be performed nationwide. The government has made this ceremony a project with a supporting budget and publicity through different media to reach people at a larger scale. Wat Phra Chetuphon decided to integrate the Noppakhro chanting ceremony into the New Year chanting ceremony to attract more people. It is observed that the majority of the Noppakhro mantras are about blessing the attendees with wealth and auspiciousness.

Therefore, it can be said that the New Year chanting ceremony is an invented tradition that incorporates capitalist ideas of the modern society. That is, if the New Year chanting ceremony supported by the government gains popularity, in the following year the ceremony will also be financially supported. However, if the ceremony turned out not to attract people, the organizer would need to change the format to make it more popular, which might not be New Year chanting, but could be other activities that might attract people. This needs to be observed further in the future.

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