

Water Festivals of Thailand: The Indian Connection

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Abstract

Indians and Thais share a common religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage. One facet of this sharing involves festivals celebrated in Thailand. The most important Thai festivals are Loy Krathong and Songkran, Both festivals linked to the Indian festivals. Thais celebrate Loy Krathong on the full moon in November and pay respect to the river by floating the banana leaf cups and asking for forgiveness from the River Goddess Ganges. River Ganges has no connection with Thailand but still is respected by Thais on this day. It is related to the Indian festival of Kartik Purnima which gets its name from the month of Kartik (November-December). On this day people will bathe in sacred rivers as the beliefs are that Gods descend of earth and reside in the holy rivers that flow naturally for healthy growth and spiritual grace.

The Thai New Year, Songkran, falls on the 13th-14th of April every year. The word 'Songkran' derives from the Sanskrit word "Sankranti," a festival celebrated in other parts of Asia. It portrays the typical ways of life of the people which are involved in the agricultural aspects in India as well as Thailand. Both the festivals are celebrated in India and Thailand with different names but with the same purpose somehow and are related to water. My paper deals with the cultural religious connection of such festivals of Thailand with India.

Key Words: Thailand, India, Myanmar, Songkran, Sankranti, Phalgun Thagyamin, Thingyan, Brahma, Krishna

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent's civilization is one of the oldest in the world. It has had a cultural continuity and has also had a great impact over most of Asia and this can be traced back to the history itself. The contribution to Southeast Asia's culture comes mainly from trade route and commercial contacts. This led to a transformation of tribal societies found in Southeast Asia to a number of kingdoms where a lot of Indian elements like religion, language, kingships and others were adopted. As Buddhism spread to East Asia and Southeast Asia, the Indian art style had a profound impact over the cultures of Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea and others. It is because of these that the entire region of Asia shares a lot of commonality among them. (Rhoads Murphey 1996, p1-8)

My purpose in writing this paper is to understand this commonality with emphasis on the one of the two Indian water festivals and to show that the way people in Southeast Asia have interpreted the festival has become a hybrid of the original. For this reason, particular emphasis will be placed on Thailand and Myanmar. For example, in India people apply color on each other to celebrate Holi. However in both Myanmar and Thailand people use water instead of colors. On the other hand, the festival serves the purpose of merit making and praying for good harvest in all the countries where it is celebrated.

In this paper I will first focus on the geographical proximity which has allowed people to witness the common cultural elements. Further the focus will be on the history of migration in this region giving rise to common practices. The paper will also present the popular myths associated with each of the two festivals covered in this study. Lastly the paper will conclude with the argument that the water festivals which are said to have been introduced to Thailand during Sukothai era are actually dating back to a much earlier period and are Indian in origin.

Geography and Monsoon Asia

Let's first look at the geographical aspects of this region to understand how the cultures were diffused due to the geographical proximities. It is right to say that half of the world lies in Asia which is from the east of Afghanistan and south of the former USSR. This part of the world also has the oldest living civilized traditions. India

and China both developed sophisticated cultures and technologies long before Europe. India, China and Southeast Asia are all equally rich in their cultural variety.

South Asia is located at the South extreme of Eurasian continent. It was partly isolated from the rest of Asia because of the Himalayas. Even then traders in the early times used the mountain pass through the Hindu Kush, westward to Asia and the Mediterranean and northeastward towards China. The Indian history was therefore influenced by the invasions of people from the north and northwest using these mountain passes. The invaders and their belief systems were easily absorbed and enriched over time with the main Indian civilization.

The Common Cultural Patterns

There are four major sub regions of monsoon Asia, namely India, China, Southeast Asia, and Japan. These are divided from each other based on the size, population, population density and others. However there is a broad range of institutions, ideas, values, conditions, and solutions that have long been distinctively Asian. These are the things which are common to each of the four major parts of monsoon Asia and have evolved in Asia in its own distinctive ways. Specifically, these include the basic importance of extended family and kin network; the respect and the importance attached to learning; the veneration of ancestors; the traditional roles of women, the hierarchical structuring of society; the awareness and the importance attached to the traditional past; importance given to group welfare over individual interest; and several other cultural traits are common to all parts of monsoon Asia.

Agriculture

Ever since the past, most of Asia has traditionally been and still remains an agrarian based economy. Its agriculture has its distinctive for its labor intensiveness. In most areas including construction and maintenance of irrigation systems, human labor is still very much in use. This dates back to the origins of the great Asian civilizations, which arose on the basis of agricultural surpluses produced by labor intensive means. The monsoon Asia has had a large population concentrated in

the plains, river valleys, and deltas. The high crop yields have therefore been able to support this large population. Since the first millennium B.C, monsoon Asia had the largest and the most productive agricultural areas in the world. This also links us to the idea that people in this part of the world were performing rituals to please the God of Rain in order to have good harvest.

As Heikkila-Horn points out, Hinduism has deep roots in Southeast Asian countries as most of them belonged to the Indianized states. The most common feature of all the Indianized states was the religious influence from Hinduism and Buddhism. The Indian culture is known to have been carried by the merchants to this region. The Brahmins priests played an important role as they also followed the traders after the trading centers were established in the region. The Brahmin priests and their religious practices were warmly welcomed by the local kings. The kings in these states will practice either Buddhism or Hinduism and sometimes even both. However in the 14th century, Islam began to dominate and both Hinduism and Buddhism were losing their grip in Malay Peninsula and Indonesian islands. As she mentions, Thailand remains the only country in Southeast Asia where the royal rituals still have Brahmanic elements to it. (Marja Leena Heikkila-Horn 1989 p. 112-113)

To see these elements as the seeds of Indian hybridity, I will focus on at least two common festivals widely celebrated in most parts of Southeast Asia. These include the New Year festival which falls in March-April and the festival of lights which falls in the month of November each year.

New Year Festival

March is the month when many countries in Asia celebrate their new year. It is the month when the weather is hot and dry and is also the time when the farmers gather their harvest and pray for a good monsoon. This is the time when people pray for good harvest, good rainfall, and a good harvest in the year to come. Water festival therefore plays a vital role in agricultural societies where regular and adequate rainfall is essential to the well-being of the people. Since the weather is hot and dry, one common way of celebrating this is by splashing

water over each others. It's the day when enemies become friend and together everyone celebrates and enjoys the festivities. This New Year celebration is celebrated in several countries in Southeast Asia with different names however all originating from one place which is India. The original is Holi celebrated throughout India, Songkran in Thailand, Feast of Thingyan in Myanmar, Bpee Mai (New Year) in Laos, Chaul Chnam Thmey in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Yunnan, China as well.

In this research paper, it is mandatory to include the legendary stories related to Holi, Songkran and Feast of Thingyan in order to show the cultural and religious linkage to India and Hinduism.

Holi

This is an ancient festival of India originally known as 'Holika'. There have been detailed descriptions of this festival in the Vedas, Puranas and also in Jaimini's Purvamimamsa-Sutras and Kathaka-Grhya-Sutras. According to historians, beliefs are that Holi was even celebrated by Aryans but more in the Eastern part of India. As noted by Ram Nath and Rajendra Kumar, the Aryans came to India after the Dravidians and married Dravidian wife as there was a shortage of Aryan women and started worshiping several gods. The festival of Holi and Vasant was given to the Indians by the Dravidians.¹ A stone inscription found at Ramgarh, Vindhya mentions about this festival and this inscription belongs to 300 BC². As Manohar points out, the inscription at Sitabenga do mention about the great festival of full moon in the month of Phalguna which now is known as Holi. In addition, King Harsha also mentions about holi in his work Ratnavali written in the 7th century³. Holi is said to have existed several centuries before Christ but have changed over the years. In the earlier period it was more of a special rite performed by married women for the happiness and well-being of the families.

¹ Ram Nath & Rajendra Kumar, Anthropology p. 170-171.

² Manohar Laxman Varadpande, History of Indian theatre p. 277

³ Harsha, Ratnavali 2004 p. 15-16

The day is celebrated on the last day of the year which is Phalgun Purnima and beginning of the New Year when the spring starts (Vasant Ritu). The day therefore commences the spring season and is also sometimes known as the Vasanta-Mahotsav.

Legendry Myths

There have been several myths associated with this festival. The most prominent one as noted by Robin Rinehart, is associated with demon king Hiranyakashyap, who wanted everyone to worship him. However, his own son Prahlad, was a great devotee of Lord Narayan. Hiranyakashyap tried every way to make his son not to worship Narayan. When every thing failed, he commanded his sister, Holika, who had a boon from Brahma that fire will not cause her any harm, to enter a blazing fire with Prahlad in her lap. However, she was not aware that the boon worked only if she enters the fire all alone. As a result Prahlad was saved for his devotion to Narayan but Holika was burned for her sinful desires. The festival, therefore, celebrates the victory of good over evil and also marks the triumph of devotion. (Rinehart, pp. 136-137)

In addition to the above account, there is also a legendry story of Krishna who started the tradition of playing with colors. Krishna used to apply colors on his beloved companion Radha and other milkmaids. Over the years this has gained popularity with the people and became more of a tradition. On the eve of holi, people will light a bonfire marking the triumph of good over evil. This practice was also evident during the Vedic period where the sacred fire of Holi was burnt along with the chanting of specific mantras which were intended for the destruction of the demonic forces. The day of Holi is then celebrated with colors and splashing of water on each other. Holi marks the end of the winter season and the beginning of spring time.

Feast of Thingyan

This is also known as the Feast of New Year and celebrated widely in Myanmar. Thingyan has derived from a Sanskrit word which means the entry of Sun to either of the Twelve signs of zodiac. It marks the entry of Sun from Pisces to Aries and therefore the end of one solar year. The festival therefore falls between 13 to 16 April every year.

This contrasts with the Hindus who celebrate the New Year from the time when the Sun moves out from Pisces. For this reason the festival of Holi is celebrated in the month of March. It's a three day festival where the belief is that the King of Gods, Thagyamin, comes down on earth for annual visit. According to Maung Htin Aung⁴, the day of Thagyamin's arrival is known as the Day of Descent, the day he departs is the Day of Ascent and the day in between is the Day of Sojourn. There is also an interesting story behind this annual visit of the King of Gods. According to legends, when the earth was created there was no life on it. Some Brahma gods seeing this newly created world came down on earth to inspect it. They were attracted by the sweet smelling soil and decided to taste it. These gods found the soil so tasty that they ate more and eventually found themselves losing their supernatural powers. As they kept eating the soil, the celestial rays of light from their bodies disappeared which lead to complete darkness. As they cried out in fear, it was the King of Gods who came down to console them. It was then that the gods of planets decided to make themselves visible from earth in the form of sun, moon and other planets. It was only then did vegetation and animals appeared on earth. The Brahma gods had to stay on earth while Thagyamin returned to his celestial abode promising to return every year at the end of each year. As Htin Aung points out, Thagyamin is no one other than Sakra and in Hinduism he was Indra but was adopted by Buddhim as a guardian god with the name Sakra. (Maung Htin Aung, 1962, p. 33)

This Feast of New Year thus celebrates the return of Thagyamin each year for 3-4 days. During this festival, special feast is prepared and is also shared with the neighbours. The time of arrival and departure of Thagyamin is signaled by booming of cannons and firing of guns. There will also be New Year pots filled with flowers and leaves to welcome the god. At the time of arrival the head of the family will lift the pots to the sky to pay his homage and at the time of departure water from this pot will slowly be poured with prayers of good fortune, rainfall and harvest for the coming year. People outside the house will splash water over each other for at least three days.

⁴Maung Htin Aung 1962, p. 23-24

Songkran in Thailand

In Thailand there are a number of festivals which celebrate Buddhist holidays. However there are a number of others which are more of Hindu festivals and over time have integrated into Buddhist celebration. Songkran is one of them and is now a main tourist attraction for foreigners. However people in the countryside still retain the very traditional ways of celebrating this festival.

According to Yavaprapas⁵ Songkran is not originally an indigenous festival but is of Indian origin and traces itself back to Lord Buddha's lifetime. The origins of this festival are described in a chapter of Buddhist sermons called "Sermon on Maha Songkran." It is believed that the Indian myth of Songkran and ceremonies were diffused to Thailand through Burmese influence in the 11th century A.D. Ever since that time the traditional New Year has been observed in the ancient Lanna Kingdom with Chiang Mai as the main place of attraction and from there spreading to other parts of Thailand. The festival is celebrated during 13-15 of April and the astrological reason for this is based on the solar calendar which is the same as Burmese beliefs as already mentioned earlier. As the sun moves from Pisces to Aries, the occasion is described as Maha Songkran and marks the beginning of the New Year.

Songkran Myth

It is widely believed that a young man, Dhammaban was so intelligent that he could even understand the language of birds. One day God Brahma came down to test Dhammaban's intelligence and asked him a question "Where is the glory of a man in the morning, afternoon and evening?" Brahma also set a condition that if Dhammaban fails answer the question correctly within the next seven days, his head will be cut off but if he did succeed, Brahma himself would cut his own head. Since the question was difficult, Dhammaban put all his effort to get an answer to this question. One day as he stopped by a large tree in a forest he found two birds on this tree. By coincidence he heard the

⁵Suttinee Yavaprapas, Ministry of Culture's official website 2008., <http://webhost.m-culture.go.th/culture01/en/index.php/articles/traditional-festival/17-songkran-festival.html>

female bird telling the male bird about this bet. It so happened that the male could answer the question and Dhammaban with his abilities could hear the conversation between the two birds. The answer was that in the morning, the glory of man was on his face because one has to wash one's face every morning. In the afternoon, the glory would be on the body or chest since one takes shower and in the evening it's on the feet as one has to wash the feet before going to bed. A person that can act this way is admirable as he/she washes all the dirt away to block the glory. As Dhammaban got the answer he rushed to see Brahma and as part of the condition, god was obliged to cut off his head.⁶

However, the head of God Brahma was too sacred and if it falls on the earth then it would lead a destructive fire and if it fell into the ocean, the ocean would dry with the intense heat. In order to avoid the calamity, God Brahma ordered his seven daughters, to carry his head on a platter and keep it in the cave on Mount Kailash, the Residence of God Shiva. From then onwards it was the beginning of the practice where once a year, one of the seven daughters must take turns to carry Brahma's head in procession.

with several other gods and goddesses around Kailash for the happiness and prosperity of all mankind. This day of procession is celebrated as the Songkran day. The head of Brahma resembles the Sun which appears glorious at spring time in Northern India and the seven daughters are the seven days of the week. Although in Thailand there is no such season but it suits well for the farmers whose main occupation is agriculture. During the month of April the weather is hot and fields are dried and not the time for agriculture. The farmers therefore spend their leisure time praying for a good rain and good harvest while waiting for monsoon.⁷

⁶Suttinee Yavaprapas, Songkran Festival, Ministry of Culture's official website 2008. <http://webhost.m-culture.go.th/culture01/en/index.php/articles/traditional-festival/17-songkran-festival.html>

⁷Suttinee Yavaprapas, Songkran Festival Ministry of Culture's official website 2008. <http://webhost.m-culture.go.th/culture01/en/index.php/articles/traditional-festival/17-songkran-festival.html>

The day of Songkran is therefore celebrated for centuries as a day marked with the sprinkling water over the Buddha images, the bathing of revered persons, and splashing water over each other and getting blessings from monks and elders. It's the day of giving and forgiving which is serving exactly the same purpose as the Indian festival of Holi.

Integration of Hindu practices dating back to Angkorian period

It is widely believed that this and some other Hindu/Brahmanical festivals in Thailand date back to the Sukothai era. However they date back to much earlier period around the Angkorian period of around eleventh and twelfth century. As David Wyatt⁸ mentions from the reign of King Jayavarman VII (r1181-1219), major religious institutions were found and these in addition to Buddhism also included people devoted to Saivite or Vaisnavite cults which were served by the brahmanical priests. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the ethnic composition of the population in the Lao areas and Siamese areas of Thailand this empire became Tai. In both of these areas, Buddhism had greatly influenced the religious beliefs and practices. However there was a mixture of brahmanical religion as well. There were several ceremonies performed in order to have good harvest, good health or rites of passage. These stemmed from the non-Buddhist practices which meant the popular form of brahmanical religion which was practiced in the Angkorian days. (David K Wyatt 1984, p. 26-28)

Later developments

It was only in 1948 that the government officially announced the 13th of April as Songkran Day and a public holiday. Later in 1989, the General Chatichai Choonhavan's government proclaimed the 12th to the 14th of April as public holidays so that people could return to their

⁸K. Wyatt. David.1984. Thailand A short history

hometowns to make merits and visit their family and relatives. However in 1997, the General Chawalit Yongchaiyuth's government changed the official dates of Songkran holidays to be the 13th of April to 15 of April in accordance with the traditionally observed days in the past.⁹

Conclusion

As shown in this article, the Thai version of Songkran is a hybrid version of Indian festival of Holi. The way the festival is celebrated is sort of similar yet also has some differences as well. For example the use of color is evident in India but colors are not used in Thailand or Myanmar. The festival is mainly a harvesting festival and since the region of monsoon Asia is an agricultural region, it is common for the farmers to celebrate this festival. Originally farmers would have festivities in their leisure when they are done with their harvest, the weather is dry, and ploughing cannot be take place. Prayers and merit making takes place on this day in order to please the God of Rain for good rainfall which in turn will bring good harvest in the next harvesting season. The dates for the festival are calculated according to the astrological calendar. Therefore the New Year festival marks the approaching end of the hot season and the beginning of the monsoon. The festival of lights (Diwali in India, Loy Krathong in Thailand, and Tazaung-mon in Myanmar) marks the end of the rainy season and the beginning of winter.

It is also interesting to note that Brahmanical beliefs and religions practices entered Southeast Asia during the Angkorian period and not during the Sukothai era as some scholars' may belief. There are several other festivals like Loy Krathong as well that have their origins in India. Further research on this will reveal yet many other elements that culturally link India with rest of the countries in Southeast Asia.

⁹Suttinee Yavaprapas, Songkran Festival, Ministry of Culture's official website 2008. <http://webhost.m-culture.go.th/culture01/en/index.php/articles/traditional-festival/17-songkran-festival.html>

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