

THE LOI KRATHONG

By

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The full moon nights of the eleventh and twelfth lunar months, i.e. in the later parts of October and November, are the days of "Loi Krathong". Loi is "to float" and Krathong is a "leaf cup" usually made of banana leaf as one often sees in the market. The leaf cup is used to hold something. Loi Krathong is, therefore, the floating of lights in a leaf cup. During October and November, all the rivers and canals in the lowlands are flooded and the waters in some places overflow their banks. The rainy season is now in a sense over. It is the time of rejoicing for the weather is fair after the rains. The sky becomes bright and clear, but without its dampness. After the strenuous labour of ploughing and planting rice for the last three months at a stretch from dawn till dusk, for the country-folk the heavy work is now over. The peasants have only to wait a month or more for the time of reaping. During this interval they have nothing much economically to do, but to spend a comparative time of leisure with feasts and festivals of which there are many in these two months of October and November. But we will speak here of the Loi Krathong only.

If you go into a market just a few days before the full moon of October and November, you will see in some stalls or shops, displayed apart from other things, a number of Krathong or leaf cups specially made for sale in this season. I will not describe these krathongs, for a representative number of their kind may be seen now. Some of the krathong are not leaf cups at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. Generally, some of them are in the shape of a bird or a boat. They are more of a toy than a krathong, and have only made their appearance in recent years. These are confined mainly to the town people. The country-folk usually have

their own home-made krathong for the occasion, and perhaps there may be one or two progressive folk who make them in the shape of a bird or boat for the merriment of their children. Usually in a krathong, apart from a candle and one or more incense sticks, a small coin, say a one or five stang piece. is also put in, and sometimes a mouthful of betal nut and betal leaf for chewing purposes is added. I am being particular in this instance, as the addition of these two small particular things is not generally observed nowadays. They are clues, if any, of the origin of Loi Krathong in its far off days.

In the evening when the full moon begins to rise in October and November, the people, mostly old women and matrons with their children, carry one or two krathongs to the edge of the brimful running water. After the candle and incense sticks in the krathong are lighted, they let it go gently on the surface of the placid waters. A few folk will sometimes raise their hands in worship to the floating krathong. They watch the krathong as they float sluggishly along the water for sometimes until they float far away or out of sight. The children to while away the time play with water fire-works. The fireworks, apart from amusement, are a part of any celebration secularly and religiously. We light fireworks sometimes in the same spirit as we light candles as an act of worship.

The floating krathong usually has a short life. As it floats far away from its starting place, the children further down stream will, in most cases, swim out to snatch the krathong. If it is a beautiful one there may be a scramble for it. They will perhaps ignore the common ones, but will not forget to snatch up the small coin, if any, in the krathong. It is an aesthetic pleasure to see many krathongs with their flickering candle lights bobbing gently up and down, borne along the silent and placid flooded waters under the light of a full moon. Of course, I speak of this in the days when there were no motor boats and outboards to disturb the peaceful waters with their waves and unpleasant sounds.

As can be gathered from the above description, there is nothing in the nature of a ritual and ceremonial act attached to the Loi Krathong. You simply light the candle and incense sticks and let loose on the water. That is all you to do. But the small coin that is put in, and the lighting of the candle and incense sticks betray that there must be a cult of some kind. If you ask the people for an explanation, the elder ones will tell you that the Loi Krathong is an act of remission to the Goddess Me Khongkha, the Mother of Water. Khongkha is the same word as the Indian "Ganga" or "Ganges", but in Siamese, it means water in general. They will further explain that in spite of the Mother's bountiful gift of water to man, he sometimes has polluted her water in various ways, therefore it is only proper to ask her pardon. It is an explanation which, if not plausible, is one which the simple believing folk can explain. But why do it in two consecutive months? Another explanation is that the Lord Buddha printed his foot on the sand shore of the Nammada River or the Nerbudda River of India in the Deccan by request of the King of Naga, who wanted to worship the Lord Buddha's foot-print when the Lord had gone. The Loi Krathong is therefore an act of worship of His foot-print which is a far cry from here to India. This is a religious but apocryphal explanation as to the origin of Loi Krathong which is not to be found in the Buddhist scriptures. It is in one way useful to preserve any tradition if a touch of religious explanation be given to it. There is another explanation in the nature of a folktale of the Buddhist Jataka kind, which long story I need not go into for it will interest folklorists only. The Chiangmai folk of Northern Thailand have a different explanation for the origin of Loi Krathong which is, I think, identical with the Burmese.

I have now given you a description of Loi Krathong on its popular side, but will now try to give you another side of the Loi Krathong of the king. You cannot expect anything much from me as I witnessed it and only in part some fifty years ago during H.M. King Chulalongkorn's reign when I was quite a young boy. The Royal Loi Krathong has now disappeared even in the later years of

that august monarch's reign. As far as I can gather, there was a revival once or twice during the reigns of Their Majesties King Vajiravudh and King Prachatipok. It was revived in one instance, on the occasion, if I remember rightly of the late Lord Northcliff's visit to Siam. It was the Loi Krathong on a minor scale. The Loi Krathong on a grand scale was never in fact done, even in King Chulalongkorn's reign. What I know about the royal Loi Krathong is from an article written by H.M. King Chulalongkorn in his invaluable work (พระราชพิธี ๑๒ เดือน) or "the King's Ceremonies during the twelve months of the years". Dr. Quaritch Wales has quoted copiously from this book in his interesting work "Siamese State Ceremonies", therefore I will not go fully into the subject. I think Dr. Quaritch Wales has already said something of the royal Loi Krathong.

H.M. King Chulalongkorn says in his book that the Loi Krathong has nothing to do with any recognized ceremony or rite. It is merely a matter of rejoicing in which all the people take part and is not only for royalty; moreover it is concerned with neither Buddhist nor Brahmin ceremony. His Majesty thought that the Loi Krathong had some connection with the floating lanterns (ลอยโคมลอย) as observed by Siamese kings in the north when Sukhothai was the capital some six or seven hundred years ago. It was described ornately in a book written by Nang Nophamat, a beautiful and learned lady of the court of King Phra Ruang of Sukhothai's capital. The lady was the daughter of a Brahmin family priest attached to the Court. She said that in the twelfth month (she said nothing of the eleventh month) i.e. in November, the country was flooded. The king and his court went for a picnic on the river to witness the people enjoying themselves during the water festival at night. Nothing is said of the Loi Krathong of the people, but it can be taken as a fact that it took place. The krathong was most probably in the same shape as that which we see at the present day, for Lady Nophamat told in her book that she had introduced a new kind of krathong in the shape of a big lotus flower and many other styles for the king to float in the running stream, no doubt for his

enjoyment. She further initiated certain recitations and songs to be sung for the king on the occasion.

As will be seen, the Loi Krathong had already by that time no meaning religiously or ritually. It was a matter of enjoying oneself leisurely and placidly during the flood period under the light of the full moon in ideal weather. No hint is given as to a small coin being in a krathong. The origin of Loi Krathong as Lady Nophamat explains is the worshipping of the Buddha's Foot Print on the sand shore of the Nammada River as already described. Now the Chinese have their own Loi Krathong too and it is a ritual act. They call the Krathong "lotus flower lamp" and call the floating "the floating of the lamps" akin to the old Siamese word of floating lanterns (ลอยโคม). Is there any connection? I think there is. The Indians have their floating lights, but vary from one locality to another. They attach no meaning or importance ritually to the act, and in fact in Southern India it is done merely as a custom and a picnic on the banks of a stream when the water is full. Of course there may be many explanations, some say that they do it to honour their favourite gods or goddesses. That is all I can gather from my Indian friends.

I can remember rather dimly the King's Loi Krathong when I was a boy. The event took place on the river in front of the Royal Landing at the Grand Palace. Part of the river in front of the Royal Landing was reserved for the occasion. Two large boats were stationed midstream, one at each end. A long rope was attached to the two boats forming an outer barrier. There were many palace guard-boats patrolling the barrier and both end openings of the water space where the Loi Krathong was to take place, in order to prevent unofficial boats trespassing this area. I obtained this description from a certain friend of mine in after years. At the time I was too young to note anything. I saw a number of miniature royal barges moored alongside the Royal Landing which I was told by my elders were the king's krathong. My attention as a small boy was naturally fixed on these particular boats more than on any thing else, hence I cannot remember what other things I had seen.

H.M. the King and his court would not arrive on the scene until after 9 o'clock in the evening. I left the place without seeing the actual Loi Krathong. Of course, there were crowds of people on the banks waiting to see the king and his court. This was all I saw and all I can remember, but I will supplement my incomplete description by and by with what I gathered afterwards.

If my memory serves me right, on one occasion when I went in a paddling boat with my elders, I saw a great number of boats going to and fro on the river outside the barrier. It was a boat meet at night time. Every boat was free to ply happily without their powerful brothers, the launches and motor boats, to disturb the peace. The people in the boats were in good spirits. They sang and played music, in some cases with recitations and repartee. The children amused themselves with water fire-works of the kind you see now. There were moveable cookshops in boats of every description, and they found ready customers. If preferred, one could take one's own food and enjoy one's repast with one's fellows in midstream in ideal surroundings and amidst merry making. I long to witness such a scene again, but it will never come back, for it is of the past, for "old times are changed, old manners gone" if I may be allowed to quote half remembered words from Sir Walter Scott's the "Lay of the last Minstrel"

Now for my supplementary of the royal Loi Krathong which I have on good authority from my friend. He says that in old days the royal Loi Krathong was on a grand scale called krathong yai or big krathong. Some of the princes and ministers of state each made a krathong. They were big ones, so big that they could accommodate in each of them a number of artists playing musical instruments or performing comic and practical jokes. The designs of the krathong were various, giant lotus flowers, junks and what not. Each owner competed with the others. No doubt there was fun and enjoyment but it was too costly to do every year. It was given up and real royal barges illuminated in designs were used as substitutes for the occasion during H.M. King Chulalongkorn's reign. This big

krathong took place in the full moon of the twelfth month (November) while the Krathong on a minor scale composed of miniature royal barges took place in the eleventh month (October). The king with his court viewed the display of Loi Krathong from a large floating pavilion having many large dug-out boats as pontoons. He dined and stayed there until past mid-night, while the royal children amused themselves with water fireworks.

The origin of Loi Krathong can be traced. Primarily it is no doubt a yearly offering to the water spirits or the floating away to the depths of all sins and calamities that may befall you. The people in Chiangmai and in the North Eastern provinces have one very big krathong made and in some places light it with torches. They put in the krathong some provisions and clothing. These will be taken by some poor people down stream far away from their starting places, an act which is equal to that of transferring sins to others using them as scapegoats. The Cambodians apart from the Royal Loi Krathong similar to the Bangkok one, have a special day during the autumn month for a Loi Krathong as an act of filial duty to their departed ancestors. They ask their departed ones to partake of a feast specially prepared for the occasion, which is no doubt an echo of the first-fruit feast of primitive days. After the supposed repast, the ancestors are sent away, imaginary of course, in a boat or krathong made of banana stems filled with provisions. The custom is still preserved by the people of Cambodian descent in some localities of the Country. But why has the Loi Krathong to take place in the evening when it is dark? Apart from aesthetic pleasure, I cannot see any other reasonable explanation than that anything pertaining to spirits is often done at night in order to give it an atmosphere of mystical effect. The Chinese popularly explain that the floating light is to guide the way for drowning spirits on their passage to the realm of darkness.

Secondly, the Loi Krathong is in a sense a thanksgiving to the Goddess of Water. It is probably confined to agricultural people who rely on the abundance of water as a source of economic life.

Thirdly, the Loi Krathong in its later development is a pastime for spending an evening outdoors amid pleasant surroundings near the brimming water which comes but twice successively in a year. The Loi Krathong is to me, therefore, a natural psychological feeling in us to let something float away as children often do. It is a mixture of a cult in a certain sense which has now lost its meaning, but which has survived only feebly in form to be added to the third surmise which you see today. That is why we have it in two consecutive months, October and November. I think the former month has something to do with the first and second explanations which subsequently merged to the later one.

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