

FERTILITY RITES IN THAILAND

by

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

Topographically, Thailand is divided into four main areas: the Northern, the North-eastern, the Central and the Southern. The Central Area is aptly called by the Thai, in their idiom, "the store-house of rice and water". It is a comparatively vast and flat alluvial plain drained by five major rivers. Chief among them is the river Chao Phya, miscalled by foreigners the Menam which only means "a river". The lower portion of this vast plain is tidal and intersected by numerous canals. The main occupation of the people living in this area is a wet rice culture, which depends on regular rainfall during the south-west monsoon. The rural population attach a great importance to this periodical natural phenomenon for they rely upon their rice crop as their major source of sustenance. Any failure of rainfall or rainfalls coming not at the expected time spells dearth and hardship to them. Like the rural population in other lands the Thai peasants have recourse to magic to ensure for themselves an abundance of rain during the coming rainy season.

The hottest month of the year in Thailand is April. In mid April, just before the regular rain monsoon breaks, the Thai traditional New Year Feast called Songkran comes. Such a feast is also observed by the people in Burma, Cambodia and the Lao Kingdom. The predominant thing about the feast as witnessed by foreigners is the water throwing by the people as their chief form of amusement. Shway Yee (Sir George Scott) has dealt at some length with the water throwing during Songkran in Burma in his book "The Burman, his life and notions". In Thailand the water throwing is also observed everywhere throughout the country, with the exception of the Southern Area of Thailand in the Malay Peninsula. Here the climatic conditions relating

to rainfall do not relatively coincide with the other areas. Instead of a period of rainfall roughly from May to October, the Southern Area has it from August to January, and rarely is there a scarcity of rain as compared to other parts of the country.

In the Southern Area there is no Songkran as observed in the real sense of the word, there is no, therefore, water throwing festival. Factually we may assume that the water throwing during the Songkran as observed in other parts of the country might have a meaning in olden days, apart from being merely an amusement. It was perhaps a certain fertility rite to procure an abundance of rain by a magical way on the principle "like produces like" of imitative magic.

If after the Songkran Feast the weather is still hot and dry and stretches on to more than a fortnight and still there is no visible sign of the expected rain, people become anxious about their welfare, for they cannot begin to plough their land in time. Unable to do otherwise, they resort to magic. One such form of magic is the procession of a female cat tied firmly to and borne on a stretcher by carrying poles. The cat on the stretcher is carried in procession through the village accompanied by a number of boys and young men who join the company voluntarily. They sing with one voice as loud as they can the well-known words in connection with such a procession. If there are musical instruments such as a drum or a gong, they beat them as hard as they can in order to obtain as loud a noise as possible. This gives rise in most cases to rowdiness and at times borders on indecency. Most of the men in the procession are, of course, more or less drunk.

The procession stops before each house on the way where the singing and dancing amid the din of primitive music are repeated. The wording of the song translated in English is as follow:

"Hail! Nang Meo (=female cat), give us rain, give us nam mon (=consecrated water) to pour on the Nang Meo's head.

Give us cowry shells (=token money) give us rice, and give us a wage for carrying the cat (on shoulders with a long pole).

นางแมวเอ๋ย	ขอฟ้าขอฝน
ขอน้ำมนต์	รดหัวนางแมว
ขอเบี้ยขอข้าว	ขอค่าจ้างหามนางแมวมา

Then follows another similar song or songs but with different wordings which have a hint of sex. For academic purposes, the wording in one of the songs is given herewith.

"The rain falls in four copious showers,

A thunder bolt strikes a nun (a character to be found in many Thai droll stories and folk-tales).

Strip off her clothes and see the *pudenda*,

The rain pours down heavily, pours down heavily".

ฝนตกสี่ท่า	ฟ้าผ่าชายชู้
แก้ผ้าดูหัว	ฝนที่ตกลงมา เทลงมา

The inmates of the house where the procession stops will come out and drench the cat with water, and give a small sum of money. This process is repeated from house to house. The money collected from each house is utilized by the young men in the procession to buy food and spirits for their own entertainment after the end of the parade.

Of all domestic animals the cat is a hater of water and highly antagonistic to such treatment. Perhaps the cat is a personification of dryness. Hence it may be considered as an inducement, by the effect of sympathetic magic, to bring on a wet day if a cat is wetted thoroughly. Why is a female cat used instead of a male one? Perhaps a female cat is also a symbol of fertility and abundance, and the use of an obscene word or words is to induce nature to play her part by pouring down the rain. To a primitive mind fertility requires two partners

of different sexes to complete the process. Mother Earth is always deemed as a Goddess of Fertility. As such she needs a male partner. That partner is the Sky God. The use of obscene words or other obscene objects may be meant as a reminder and inducement to the Sky God to play his role by pouring down the rain, his semen perhaps, to Mother Earth, who receives it in her womb, the earth, and in an appropriate time, growth springs.

There is a device for inducing the rain to pour down which is prevalent among the peasants of Central Thailand. It is called "Pan Mek" in Thai which means "shaping a cloud". It is a figure made with mud-clay in the image of a man and a woman united in an embrace-like sitting or lying posture. In certain localities the former posture is predominant and in others it is the reverse. Walking during a hot day during a drought along a field's path or on a road near a rice field, one sometimes comes across such clay figures lying near the side of the path or road. They are of varying sizes from a small one the size of a hand span to a relatively bigger one. They are mostly made by boys and young men of the village either with the implicit consent or the encouragement of the elders. My American friend, an anthropologist, once showed me a photograph, which he had taken, of such a figure in life-size, carved out of mud-clay in the manner of a high relief. The photograph was taken some four years ago in a rice field not far from Bangkok. Such figures are well-known, perhaps, throughout the Central Area of Thailand. The figure is sometimes found together on the stretcher with the cat in the procession as previously described.

During the process of shaping such figures there is a magical formula in the form of "mon" (= 'mantra' in Sanskrit meaning a spell or a charm). There are in this country a large number of "mon" which are put to many uses ranging from the cure of certain ailments, such as eye-sore, the sting of the spine of a cat-fish, or the planting of certain fruit trees, etc., to that of harming one's enemy by the use of black magic. "Mon's"

wordings are usually in the Thai language, and most of them contain obscene words relating to sex. Sometimes Pali or Sanskrit words in the form of phrases and 'gatha' or stanzas are to be found interspersed here and there within the "mon" text. Usually the "mon" begins with the word "Om", the sacred syllable of the Hindus, and ends frequently with the words "Svāha Svāht", and in rare cases with the words "phut phat" or other Pali and Sanskrit sacred words. Evidently, such words betray an Indian origin, particularly the esoteric doctrine of Mantrayana Sect of later Buddhism to be found mostly in Eastern India, Tibet and the neighbouring countries.

Here is the "mon" text relating to "the shaping of a cloud" in English translation.

"Shape a cloud and recite mystically the spell. Take a cloth to screen human beings. Shape the *pudenda*, then the rain will pour down heavily, pour down heavily".

It is to be noted that the above "mon" has neither the word "Om" at the beginning nor the ending words "Svāha Svāht" as afore-mentioned. It is to be presumed, therefore, that it is not taken seriously by the reciter, but is more in a crude or humorous vein. The "Mon" are usually composed in measured syllables and in most cases in a rhyming pattern to facilitate memorizing. In relieving certain pains and ailments the reciter of the "mon" is to intone it in a loud voice, presumably within the hearing of the patient. Perhaps if the patient hears the "mon" with words one never expected to hear, he or she will be tickled by the joke, thus relieving the pain, at least temporarily.

Allied to the figure "shaping a cloud" is the figure called "In". It, too, is a figure of a man and a woman in an embrace-like posture. Its sizes range from a big one, the size of a small fountain pen about one and half inches in length, to the smallest one, so far as I have seen, about the size of a small berry. It is made either of metal alloy, ivory or hard wood. Some of the Thai people of both sexes carry an "In" with them. Whoever

has an "In" with him, so people say, will increase his or her wealth and prosperity. As "In" figures are to be found frequently in North Thailand, Chiengmai for instance where there are a comparatively large number of Burmese residents and as the word "In" is to be found in Burmese meaning a magic square or other allied objects I am inclined, therefore, to think that "In" is of Burmese origin. When I was in Rangoon at the beginning of this year (1960), I took advantage of making an enquiry about the "In". No one in Rangoon University could give me any satisfactory information, with the exception of one, an elderly man, who told me that in Burma there were such figures as I had described, but they were confined to the country folk and were rare among modern people. Later I found in Bangkok that there is a Thai "mon" formula to be recited mystically as a controlling agent for the "In". Judging from the text of this sacred formula which contains a number of jumbled words, one suspects that the "In" has something to do with love-making rather than with an increase of wealth and prosperity as one was previously informed. Further, I was told that when going to bed, one should carry the "In" with one and recite the magical formula as a controller of the "In" figure. So the "In", then, is none other than a class of magical objects relating to fertility.

Fertility rites are world-wide, to be found in one form or another either explicitly expressed or in a veiled form due to refinement and development of culture. The presentation of this paper is to supply certain information on fertility rites in Thailand for a comparative study with rites of other neighbouring countries which are scantily recorded.