

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE THAI 'CITY PILLAR'

by

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Until the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), when Bangkok's administration gradually established effective control over its more distant provinces, the *myay*¹, or provincial city with its surroundings, often had a great deal of autonomy. Nowadays many of these old cities possess a relic of those times, the *låg myay* or 'city pillar'. The *låg myay* was erected in the name of the highest political authority, and up to the present day the religious practices connected with the guardian spirit of the *låg myay* (*câawphô låg myay*) are reminiscent of attitudes towards a seat of political power.

The city pillar has attracted much attention in literature. However, information about the institution is piecemeal, and scattered through various types of sources. Sometimes a *låg myay* is referred to in an ancient chronicle; there may be a passing comment in an archeological survey, and quite often there is a passage devoted to a town pillar in a detailed description of a provincial city. In this essay it is intended to draw together much of this information. In doing so, an attempt is made to answer questions regarding the possible origin of the town pillar, and questions surrounding the symbolism attributed to this object as well.

A city pillar can often be found in or near the exact geographical centre of a provincial city, that is, near the centre of the rectangle formed by the old city walls². Thus it is logical that another meaning of the word *låg myay* is the 'zero' milestone of a city or town³. However, there are several exceptions to this rule, for example those cases where an old city pillar has been removed to a site in front of the town hall⁴, a move which underlines the traditional link between city pillar and authority. In other instances, a *låg myay* can be moved from an old site to a new one made available by the municipality. Thus Rama II (1809-1824) ordered the Ratchaburi pillar to be shifted from its ancient resting place to a position on the eastern side of the Mae Klong river⁵. Similarly, a new city pillar was recently erected in Phetchaburi, on a

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¹ Throughout the text, Thai words are transliterated according to the Haas system. Exceptions are made in the case of proper names of provinces, and the transliteration of Thai personal names.

² This has also been remarked by G.W. Skinner, who personally visited many city pillars. See the account of his personal conversation with R.B. Textor in Textor's unpublished dissertation, "An inventory of non-Buddhist supernatural objects in a central Thai village" (Cornell University, 1960), p. 508.

³ G.B. McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 920. In this essay, all other types of ritual poles, such as ornamented sacrificial poles and the post in the middle of the threshing floor, have been left out of the argument.

⁴ Such as the three pillars of Lampang Province. See *ñaanchalṅṅ 25 phúthasādtawād* ("Twenty-five Centuries of Buddhism", Commemoration Volumes, Bangkok, Udom, 1957), hereafter *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Lampang, p. 14.

⁵ *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Ratchaburi, pp. 27-28.

site quite a long distance from the city centre. In accordance with its political connotations, there is only one site for a city pillar per province, but at this site sometimes more than a single pole can be found. For example Trat Province has two poles, and Lampang three.

Invariably the pillar is of considerable size. The part that is visible above the ground is at least one metre high, but sometimes a *lâg myañ* can reach two metres or more. Usually it is made of a hardwood, often sandalwood or teak, but in the literature there is sometimes mention of a city pillar of brick⁶, or of stone⁷. The pillar may be of plain wood, but it is not unusual to find it completely gilded or painted bright red. Invariably the top of the pillar is carved and it ends in a rounded or pointed tip. The details of the ornamental carving vary considerably and will be discussed later in this essay. Occasionally the base also carries ornamental carving, but between top and base the pillar is free of sculpted decoration.

Human sacrifices

It is widely rumoured that under the city pillars lie the bones of people who were sacrificed to become guardian spirits of the town. Kit Niranphanit writing about the history of Trat's town pillar, reports that:

according to some old people, before the installation of the town pillar could take place, there was a public announcement that during the night some people would knock loudly on the doors and call on people to be town spirit. Naturally one should not answer back, for if one did, one would be sacrificed. Late that night, when all was quiet, those persons went out and rapped on the doors of the houses, but nobody answered until they reached the house of Uncle Man and Uncle Khong who answered and thus were taken to become the spirits of the town pillars. They were each seated in the two holes that had been dug. They were buried when the poles were put down and the holes filled with sand.⁸

During my fieldwork in Ratchaburi Province, a similar tale was related for Ratchaburi. When it was decided to set up the *lâg myañ*, government officials went out by boat, calling four names: Jùu, Jang, Man and Khong. The first persons who reacted to these calls were taken and these four people were buried alive under the shrine of the town pillar. A similar story has also been reported for the pillar of Kanchanaburi Province⁹.

In similar vein, Textor reports that people believed that the consecration of the town pillar of Bangkok was accomplished in part by human sacrifice. He adds that there are indeed historical sources stating that human sacrifice was used to provide protection for cities, as late as the early decades of the nineteenth century¹⁰. Graham, describing the shrine of the city

⁶ See the Suwannákhamdeej Chronicle as translated by C. Notton, *Annales du Siam*, pt. 1 (Paris, Charles-Lavauzelle, 1926), p. 29. The detail about the bricks does not occur in the abridged version of the chronicle which can be found in *Phrapheeni thaj phāgnāyā* by Sanguan Chotesukharat (Bangkok, Odeon, 1970), pp. 28-33

⁷ *BCV*, vol. 2, Changwat Phitsanulok, p. 20.

⁸ In an undated pamphlet, printed in Trat Province, entitled *Tamnaan sǎan thêebphaarág cǎawphǎc lâg-myantrāad*. For the full translation see the annex to this essay.

⁹ From field notes collected on 12 November 1968.

¹⁰ R.B. Textor, "An inventory . . .", p. 508.

pillar, mentions that the spirit guardians were "usually of the kind manufactured by the sacrifice of human life and devoted thenceforth to the general care of the place and to the protection, individually or in the mass, of all its inhabitants."¹¹

Indirect evidence for the antiquity of sacrifices under a town pillar comes from the ancient Suwannákhamdæŋ Chronicle, where it tells how Indra instructed people in the setting up of the pillar. One hundred and one statues of various people, as well as the images of a wide variety of animals, had to be manufactured and deposited in the trench upon which the town pillar should be erected¹². The substitution of statues reads like a Buddhist version of the real thing.

The influence of Buddhist doctrine upon royal behaviour should not be overstated, however. Even in nineteenth-century Buddhist Cambodia, human sacrifices under royal patronage appear to have taken place¹³.

Notwithstanding the fact that the legend of human sacrifices under the *lâg myaŋ* is widespread, there is no firm evidence of such practices, at least for the Bangkok period. The chronicles do not mention the custom, and as far as we are aware, no skeletons have ever been unearthed on the site of a city pillar¹⁴. The names Man and Khong of the victims in Changwat Trat, and Jûu, Jang, Mân and Khong of the Ratchaburi people, who were seized to become spirit guardians, need not necessarily convince us of the truth of the legend. They are all common names of people, but the order in which these names are cited makes them auspicious words. '*Mânkhon*' means secure, steadfast, and '*jûujangmânkhon*' may be translated as 'remain steadfast'. The use of these names therefore is a play on words, which impute desirable, auspicious aspects to the legend of the human sacrifice¹⁵.

Although there is no certainty that people were killed during the ceremony of establishing a town pillar, there need be little doubt that at the beginning of the seventeenth century such practices were common with regard to the establishment of town fortifications. Jeremias van Vliet, who was in charge of the Dutch East India Company's office in Ayutthaya from 1629 to 1634, describes not only the general custom of impaling pregnant women under the posts which support fortifications, but also relates in elaborate detail how in 1634 the king's plans to do so

¹¹ W.A. Graham, *Siam* (London, De La Mare Press, 1924), vol. II, pp. 283-284.

¹² Notton, *Annales du Siam*, pt. 1, p. 29.

¹³ See D.P. Chandler's "Royally sponsored human sacrifices in nineteenth-century Cambodia: The cult of *nak tã Me Sa* (Mahisāsūramardini) at Ba Phnom," *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 62 pt. 2 (July 1974), pp. 207-222.

¹⁴ If search for such skeletons were ever to be conducted it would surely meet with strong opposition from people afraid that the guardian spirits may cause disaster in the district.

¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the names Man and Khong were chosen also to represent the fictitious radio characters who discussed the government's policies during the Second World War. Thailand's Department of Public Information chose these words also because of their auspicious combination. See "The first Phibun government and its involvement in World War II" by Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 62 pt. 2 (July 1974), p. 39.

with 68 women had to be abandoned, and how only four were actually sacrificed¹⁶. The spirits of pregnant women who died would make ferociously supernatural agents, a belief that is still strong today¹⁷. Pallegoix also notes how he has received a report on this matter. He printed Mgr. Bruguères's letter about the custom of sacrificing three innocent men when a new city gate is established or an old one repaired¹⁸, but at the same time Pallegoix does not wish to affirm the existence of the custom.

Since van Vliet was a careful observer and trustworthy narrator, we may surmise that the legends about human sacrifices under a *làng myaṇ* go back to practices of the Ayutthaya period. It remains an open question whether human beings were sacrificed under the city pillar itself, or whether the stories of offerings under the city gate have attached themselves to the town pillar in the course of the centuries. The latter is quite possible, for guardian spirits of a city are known by the generic term *s̄ya myaṇ*, which encompasses also the guardian spirit of the city pillar. A synonym of *làng myaṇ* is '*làng s̄ya*'¹⁹.

Religious customs

Whether or not the town pillars were established with human sacrifices, there is a general belief in the existence of a guardian spirit connected with each pillar. This spirit is of the category *cāawphṣṓ*, which indicates it is a male spirit, related to a specific locality and guarding a specific terrain. Of all the various *cāawphṣṓ* (such as *phrāphuum cāawthī*), the *cāawphṣṓ làng myaṇ* is the mightiest. In a status hierarchy a *cāawphṣṓ làng myaṇ* would occupy the highest rank of the guardian spirits, but would be below the position of regular gods or *theewadaa*²⁰.

Because of its important status, many devotees treat the guardian spirit of the town pillar with respect which in some cases borders upon trepidation. There are many drivers who will quickly lift their hands palm to palm towards the forehead when passing the shrine. This gesture may avert the spirit's displeasure which is easily incurred, for the road junctions around the shrine are reputed to witness many traffic accidents²¹. In 1974 there was a series of traffic

¹⁶ See L.F. van Ravenswaay's translation of van Vliet's "Description of the Kingdom of Siam", *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 7, 1910, pp. 18-20. Exactly the same custom is encountered in Burma. We read in the *Upper Burma Gazetteer* (1, 11, 35): "When Mandalay was founded, the king of Burma ordered that a pregnant woman should be slain in order that her spirit might become the guardian *nat* of the city."

¹⁷ See *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, by B.J. Terwiel (London, Curzon Press, 1975), p. 59.

¹⁸ Mgr. Pallegoix, *Description du royaume Thai ou Siam* (Paris, 1854), vol. 2, pp. 50-52.

¹⁹ When referring to the guardian spirit of a *làng myaṇ* J.A.N. Mulder calls them *s̄ya myaṇ*. (See his "The moral and the powerful: A note on the Thai animistic worldview", *The Journal of Humanities* [Chiang Mai University] 1977, p. 73.)

²⁰ At first sight this appears to contradict Mulder ("The moral and the powerful", p. 73), when he states that there is no strict hierarchy among these powers. However, the key word here is "status" hierarchy. It may well be that the *phrāphuum cāawthī* who looks after a single residence ranks higher in frequency of contacts made than does the *cāawphṣṓ làng myaṇ*.

²¹ This is the case, for example in Ratchaburi.

accidents in the centre of Nakhon Sawan. Many people were convinced that the *sya myan* was showing displeasure about the fact that when a new *låg myan* was installed earlier that year, the provincial authorities had neglected to invite the old guardian spirit to the new shrine²².

It is thus necessary to be careful when dealing with *cåawphõ låg myan*. In Ratchaburi Province, the story is sometimes related that the guardian spirit has punished a pair of lovers who had sought shelter in the shrine. At daybreak, to their embarrassment and mortification, these victims of the guardian spirit's wrath had been unable to separate their bodies and they had been found by the populace. Only after having been promised a substantial gift was *cåawphõ låg myan* willing to relent²³. This story is relevant not only with regard to the fierce character of the guardian spirit, but also it may help weigh the evidence against the idea that the *låg myan* is essentially a fertility symbol. It would be unlikely that the lovers' act would have incurred such strong displeasure in a shrine which is, at least in the eyes of some Western researchers, the centre of a phallic cult.

Though many devotees treat the guardian spirits with great respect, this does not stop people from making many requests of them. In the more isolated provincial cities, the city pillar may stand in the open with a small shrine placed next to it, where people can make their offerings of incense, candles and garlands and contact the guardian spirit. In the more prosperous provincial centres, a proper shrine is built around the city pillar, with entrances at all four cardinal directions. Such shrines are made of brick and are lavishly decorated with stucco. They are big enough for people to enter and add their gifts to the small mountain of donations made by previous devotees.

The most important one in the country is in Bangkok, near the Grand Palace. The shrine was founded in 1782, at the very beginning of the Chakri dynasty, but it has been repaired and altered several times. In 1969 the shrine management spent 1.6 million baht on reconstruction which included the installation of a big safety vault to keep valuables and cash²⁴. The Bangkok city pillar has acquired such a name for itself that daily many thousands of baht worth of flowers, incense and candles are sold. This shrine is managed as a business concern by the War Veteran's Organization, which looks after its upkeep and performs annually, on 21 April, a ceremony to celebrate its foundation day²⁵.

The guardian spirits of all Thai cities which possess a shrine have gained tremendous support from the Chinese population which settled in the cities. These immigrants have

²² *The Bangkok Post*, 15 February 1974.

²³ Field work notes, 15 November 1968.

²⁴ *The Bangkok Post*, 10 March 1969.

²⁵ *Prachaachåudraajwan* [The Daily Nation], 22 April 1975.

equated *cāawphō* *lāg myaṇ* with Ch'eng-huang, the god of the walls and moats²⁶. It seems that the Chinese people are more likely than the Thais to regard the guardian spirit as a power which can be regularly contacted. In general, people will not go to the shrine of the city pillar for a minor worry. They will usually approach the shrine with a weighty problem. For example, a student who dreads an important examination may ask the guardian spirit for help. A person applying for a job may try to increase his chances by contacting the town spirit. The shrine is also visited by those wishing to find out what the future has in store for them, or wanting guidance in buying a lottery ticket. With regard to their more domestic problems, many people would be reluctant to contact the city shrine. Sometimes the proportion of devotees who are Chinese is so great that the whole character of the cult building is changed into a Chinese one²⁷.

The religious observances towards the city guardian spirit follow the same sequence as those towards other local genii. The first stage consists of a formal request for intercession. The second stage, which takes place only if the request was granted, consists of paying off one's debt to the spirit. When contacting the *cāawphō*, the devotee kneels down in the shrine, lights candles and incense sticks and politely lowers the head three times. At this instance, it may be surmised that the devotee has been able to win the attention of the spirit and he or she may now formulate a request. This may be muttered in a low voice, but may also be worded soundlessly. Every person can develop a special way of address, precede it with some auspicious Buddhist words, or go straight to the matter. Having explained the problem for which intercession is desired, the supplicant closes with a promise; for example, "if you help me in this matter, I will come and give you an elephant" (meaning a wooden replica of an elephant).

What exactly is promised to the spirit depends on two considerations: in the first place on what the spirit is believed to like, and secondly on how difficult the request is for the spirit to grant. The first consideration is guided by lore and previous experiences. It draws on the knowledge of the spirit's particular tastes and preferences, of things which might tempt him to use his supernatural powers. There is a wide variety of offerings which one might try: a wooden elephant or horse, the images of some servants, a tray with a miniature set of classical dancers, some fragrant foods such as bananas, sweetmeats or a bottle of whiskey, a ritual object such as a *bajsi*²⁸, an especially beautiful garland, 100 cooked eggs, a beautifully roasted chicken, or a pig's head and trotters. Some of the larger gifts which have been known to sway the city spirit are the renting of an orchestra which plays classical music, and the performance of some classical dance excerpts by a troupe which can often be found in the neighbourhood of the largest shrines. Seven days of folk opera is probably the largest reward offered. It is ob-

²⁶ G.W. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1957), pp. 130-131.

²⁷ It is lamented by some Thais that the shrine for the *sya myaṇ* (in this case without a town pillar) in Nakhon Si Thammarat has become totally Chinese. *BCV*, vol. 1, Changwat Nakhon Si Thammarat, p. 24. See also the Chinese temple built around the pillar of Changwat Suphan Buri in *Thiaw myaythaj* (hereafter *TM*), *Naṇsyy 'ān phōmtām sāykhom sygsāa* (Krom wichaakaan, Bangkok, 1971), vol. 1, p. 372.

²⁸ A *bajsi* is a ritual tray, a conical structure, usually made from folded banana leaves.

vious that the person making a request will weigh carefully the amount to be the spirit's reward. If one asks for the speedy recovery of one's husband who has a sudden stomach ache, a small reward of a succulent chicken may suffice, especially since the food offering may be consumed at home after having given the spirit a chance to partake of its essence and flavour. However, if a doctor has proclaimed that the man has to be operated on for some malignant tumour, the *cāawphō* *lāg myan*'s intercession can probably only be obtained with a much more tempting offer.

This system of offering a reward to an unseen power for help in difficulties is widespread in Thailand. It is known as *kēḥbon*, as "paying off vows". There are men who vow to become a Buddhist monk in order to escape a tremendous danger. Once the vow has been made and a supernatural intervention has occurred, one has a moral obligation to fulfil the promise, lest one invites the anger of the unseen power which has come to one's aid. In order to ensure that there is no misunderstanding between supplicant and supernatural power, the vow is often made very specific, such as "I will give you an elephant of wood, costing 25 baht"; or, in the case of the man escaping danger by vowing to join the Sangha, "I will become a monk for seven days' duration".

Geographical distribution

Lāg myan appear fairly evenly distributed over the provinces. An ancient one can be seen in Phuket, in the far south, and others are in Pattani and Yala²⁹. There are city pillars in the western provinces which border on Burma, such as Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi and Phetchaburi³⁰. In the north there is a shrine in each of the ancient provinces of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang and Nan³¹, while in the northeast the city pillar can be found in Nakhon Ratchasima, Kalasin, Roi Et, Ubon Ratchathani and Buriram³². Throughout the centre we can encounter one in the old provincial capitals such as Suphan Buri, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, Nakhon Sawan and Ayutthaya³³. Towards the east, there is one not far from Cambodia in Changwat Trat³⁴. The most important city pillar of all is the one of Bangkok, which is not surprising since after all the city pillar is connected with a sphere of political power and Bangkok has become supreme in this respect.

Throughout Thailand the city pillar is known as *lāg myan* (city pillar) and sometimes also as *lāg sṇa* (guardian spirit pillar). Only in Chiang Mai is the city pillar also known as *intha-khiila*, derived from the Pāli word *indakhila* or Indra's post, the post, stake or column of

²⁹ Phuket: Prathum Chumphengphan (ed.), *Boraanwādhūsathāan naj phāagtājtōnnā ruam 7 changwat* (Bangkok, Department of Fine Arts, 1974), opp. p. 129 and p. 149; Pattani, *TM*, vol. 3, p. 167; Yala, *TM*, vol. 3, p. 178.

³⁰ Kanchanaburi, field notes 29 December 1968; Ratchaburi, *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Ratchaburi, p. 28 and Phetchaburi, personal observation, September 1977.

³¹ Chiang Mai, Sanguan Chotesukharat, *Prapheeni thajphāagnā*, pp. 24-33; Nan, Dr R.B. Davis, personal communication 1 Dec. 1977; Lamphun, *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Lamphun, p. 20; Lampang, *BCV*, vol. 3, pp. 13-14.

³² Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, Roi Et and Buriram are mentioned in Textor, "An inventory . . .", p. 509; Kalasin in *BCV*, vol. 1, Changwat Kalasin.

³³ For the *lāg myan* of these *changwat*, see the relevant sections of *BCV*.

³⁴ Personal observation, 30 October 1968.

Indra at or before the city gate³⁵. Like many other aspects of the culture of the north, this use of the Indian term for the city pillar could have come from Burma³⁶.

It must be noted that the concept of a central pole which is set up by the highest authority of a *myay* is not confined to Thailand only. It may be found among various Tai speakers. There is a city pillar in Luang Prabang in Laos³⁷. *Làg myay* have been encountered among the White Tai and the Black Tai who live in Viet Nam³⁸, and among the Lü of Laos and southern Yunnan³⁹. A search in the literature for evidence of a city pillar among the Shans in Burma resulted only in finding a rather oblique reference by Leach which is worth mentioning for its reference to the underlying symbolism. He discusses the concept of *baren*, a mythological monster which stands for a Shan prince (*saopha*) but which also stands for the male phallic principle "which the chief (Shan or Kachin) represents"⁴⁰. It is thus clear that the concept of a *làg myay* is widespread among Tai speakers, and that among various groups it is known by the same term.

Origin

In the literature there are two different hypotheses with regard to the origin of the *làg myay*: the idea that the city pillar is derived from the Khmer empire, and the theory that it is an indigenous aspect of Tai culture.

On the possible Khmer origin, Skinner commented in 1957 as follows.

The Thai *lak-mueang* is derived from the Siva-linga of India, via Cambodia. In ancient Khmer culture, stone Siva-lingas in phallic form came to symbolize royal sovereignty and were enshrined in the capital and viceregal towns, including many in what is now Thailand. Long after the fall of Angkor, almost every city (in the area formerly subject to the Khmer empire) which aspired to independence or autonomy maintained a linga or *lak* ("pillar") at its symbolic centre. By the nineteenth century the *laks* were in most cases carved from logs and stylized, though their phallic nature remained apparent. In the popular Thai religion, the *lak-mueang* was assimilated to the animistic *phi* or spirits and came to be regarded as the supreme *phi* of the city or state.⁴¹

There can be little doubt that *śivalinga* were paramount in Khmer civilization⁴², and that these cult objects were established in some parts of Thailand which were once subject to the Khmer empire. It is quite a different matter, however, to equate *śivalinga* and *làg*, and to

³⁵ *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* (ed. T.W. Rhys Davis and W. Stede, London, Luzac 1966), p. 121.

³⁶ It seems that the term Indakhīla was also used in Cambodia, however, not to indicate a central city pole but the central marking stone of a temple. M. Giteau, *Le bornage rituel des temples bouddhiques au Cambodge*, Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, vol. 68 (Paris, 1969), pp. 4-5.

³⁷ Mentioned by C. Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao (rites et mythes)*, (Vientiane, Vithagna, 1973) p. 49.

³⁸ H. Maspéro. "Moeurs et coutumes des populations sauvages", in G. Maspéro (ed.), *Un empire colonial français: L'Indochine* (Paris, van Oest, 1939), vol. I, p. 239 and p. 242.

³⁹ F.M. Lebar et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, HRAF, 1964), p. 212.

⁴⁰ E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 44 (London, Athlone, 1970 [1954]), p. 112.

⁴¹ G.W. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 130.

⁴² For example, L.P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, NS vol. 41, part 1 (Philadelphia, 1951), p. 25 et passim.

postulate that gradually the stone lingam was supplanted by wooden *lāgs*. As to whether the phallic nature of the pillar is apparent or not, that depends to a large extent upon the beholder; in the last section of this essay we deal with that aspect in some detail. As far as we are aware, the Thais, who between the tenth and thirteenth centuries gradually established themselves in the region which is now called Thailand, did not erect *śivalinga* to symbolize their independence. Accordingly, no *śivalinga* of such a late date have been found in Thailand. Moreover, Skinner's hypothesis does not account for the fact that Tai speakers in the northern region of Viet Nam, who have never been subjected to Khmer rule and who have had little contact with the Thais, possess a wooden pole in the centre of their largest political unit and call it *lāg myaŋ*. Unless further evidence is unearthed, we may safely disregard the idea that the Khmer *śivalinga* was the paradigm which gave rise to the *lāg myaŋ*.

The other hypothesis concerning the origin of the city pillar has been proposed by Phya Anuman Rajadhon. Basing his opinion upon the fact that the words *lāg myaŋ* are not of foreign derivation, he stated that the idea was indigenously Thai⁴³. The geographical distribution of the use of these words seems to confirm this idea. It appears that the words *lāg myaŋ* refer everywhere to a post, established in the centre of a city-state or *myaŋ*. However, the conclusion that the city pillar is indigenously Thai does not necessarily mean that all the customs and beliefs noted in the earlier parts of this essay are intrinsically part of the ancient Thai, preIndianized culture. In order to determine the possible original character of the *lāg myaŋ*, we need to take note of the ceremonial details surrounding the city pillar of Tai speakers who have not been Indianized, for such peoples may have a culture which comes much closer than that of present-day Thais to the concept 'indigenously Thai'.

Maspero, in his chapter "Moeurs et coutumes des populations sauvages", has provided us with valuable information regarding the city pillar⁴⁴. He explains how, among the Black Tai and the White Tai of northern Viet Nam, the *mu'o'ñ* (*myaŋ*) is the largest political unit, under the control of a *tao* (*cāaw*) or overlord. This political organization is matched by a religious one. Next to the human overlord exists *fi mu'o'ñ* (spirit of the *myaŋ*), hierarchically superior to the spirit of a smaller town. The *fi mu'o'ñ*, the sovereign spiritual lord of the whole region, lives in a great tree at the entrance of the chief's village. Every year just when the rice begins to come to seed in the fields (around July or August) a buffalo is sacrificed to this spirit. The offering, together with rice, alcohol and betel leaves, is placed on a platform in front of the big tree. The *fi mu'o'ñ* has not the highest status amongst supernatural beings. Various gods rank above him as is apparent from the order of invocations to the gods⁴⁵.

Among the Black Tais, apart from the *fi mu'o'ñ* whose domain is the entire *myaŋ*, there exists a god of each of the overlords. Its domain is the same as that of the *fi mu'o'ñ*, but it specifically looks after the chief and his family and is changed each generation. This family spirit of the chief is represented by a wooden post which is called *lak su'a* (*lāg sŷa*). The post is erected in a sacred spot where the earth must not be disturbed. Each new chief removes his predecessor's post and, after mourning for the old chief is over, erects his own.

⁴³ As quoted by Textor, "An inventory . . .", p. 508.

⁴⁴ In G. Maspero (ed.), *Un empire*, pp. 234-242.

⁴⁵ For details see *ibid.*, p. 238.

Amongst the White Tais the pillar has lost its particular character. It is placed at the foot of the *fi mu'o'n* tree, and serves as sacrificial post. In some villages it is regarded as the tablet of the *fi mu'o'n*, an idea borrowed from the sinicized Annamites⁴⁶. A close link between the *låg myañ* and the guardian spirit of the whole *myañ* is also reported for the Lü by Izikowitz and Lafont⁴⁷.

To summarize, in the whole region where city pillars are erected the *låg myañ* stands for a guardian spirit whose territory comprises the whole *myañ*⁴⁸. The Black Tais believe there is a personal relationship between the post's spirit and the ruler. Other groups, such as the White Tai and the Lü consider this relationship to be less personal and see the post standing there for the *phii* of the realm. None of the reports on customs regarding the city pillar mentions sacrifices under the post. This omission lends weight to the theory that offerings under the city gate in order to make *sya myañ* have become attached to ideas about the city pillar, and that the two represent originally quite separate customs.

Symbolism

It is relatively easy to make a case for the phallic nature of the city pillar, which some scholars consider obvious⁴⁹. Its general shape, longer than it is wide, with usually a rounded, somewhat bulbous top, convinces some researchers of the phallic nature of the symbol. Apart from its appearance, it may also be pointed out that the symbol represents a **male** guardian spirit. Moreover, the town pillar may be seen as a seat of political might. The pillar's shape, coupled with its relation to power, may well convince scholars that here we are dealing with a phallus.

Yet, when Thais consider the *låg myañ*, they do not find its shape obviously phallic. In the course of research we had the opportunity to discuss the symbolism of the town pillar with many Thai informants, including farmers and academics, men and women, monks and laypersons, all of whom rejected the idea that the *låg myañ* could be a symbolic representation of a phallus.

These two conflicting views open up an interesting set of questions. On the one hand, it can be argued that the Thais deny the evidence in front of their eyes for reasons of prudery. Informants could be afraid to offend or shock the researcher, and could prefer to tell a 'white lie'. Or there could be some deep conflict between the religious concepts associated with the town pillar and ideas connected with a phallus. On the other hand, it is possible that outside observers have been wrong in their symbolic assumptions. In some cases, researchers may not have had an opportunity to examine the exact nature of the carving, for the city pillar may be hidden under pieces of colourful cloth and garlands (see figure 1). But even when properly

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁴⁷ As reported in F.M. Lebar *et al.*, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 212.

⁴⁸ H.H. Prince Dhaninivat likens the ancient city pillar to a symbol of the king himself. (See *rýañ phrá' ráadchawaj baajpá' 'in*, reprinted in the 1966 cremation commemoration volume for *Məmcáaw* Prasəbprason Chumphon, p. 48).

⁴⁹ G.W. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 130; R.B. Textor, in "An inventory . . .", pp. 508-509 reports that he finds Skinner's theory, including the phallic origin, plausible. The same thoughts were found to be shared by several Western scholars with whom the author discussed the matter privately.



Figure 1. The city pillar at Ratchaburi in 1968.

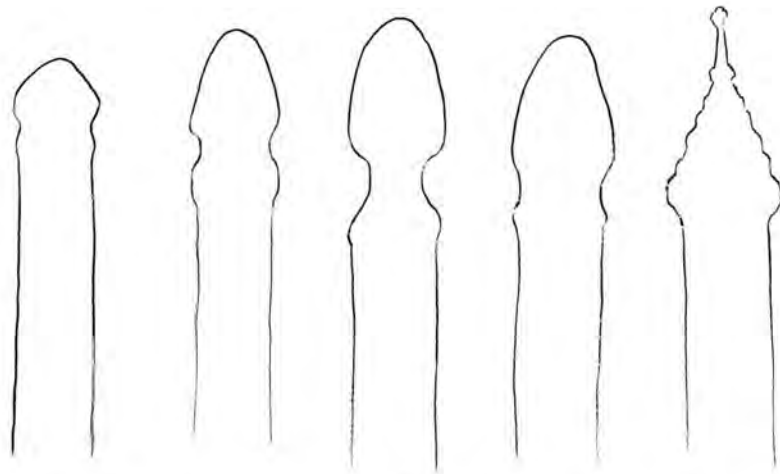


Figure 2. Sketch of the silhouette of five city pillars; from left to right : the ancient *lāg myan* in Changwat Phuket, the three at Lampang, and the recently carved one just outside the city of Phetchaburi.

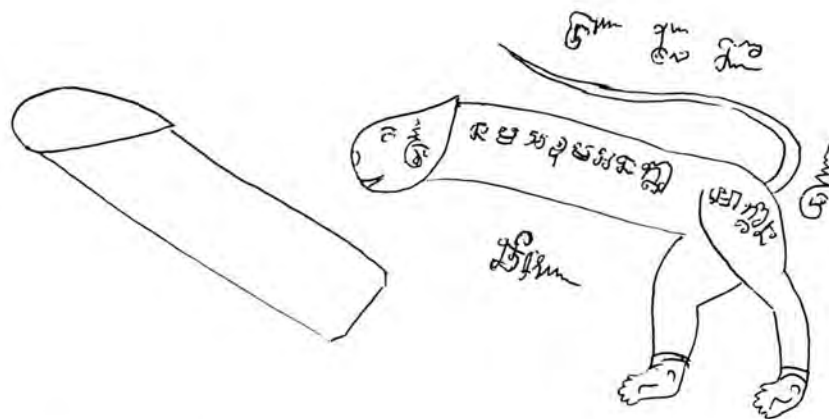


Figure 3. Left : outline of a wooden phallic symbol used during a spirit possession ceremony. Right : Sketch of a tattoo-design, drawn on 22 October 1968 by 'aacaan Nguan, a professional tattooer.

observed, it is possible to come to a wrong conclusion, for though phallic symbols are ubiquitous among human cultures, there may be a specific range of representations which could vary from culture to culture. In other words, what is 'obviously' a phallus in western Europe need not necessarily be so in Thailand. This latter thought became increasingly prominent in the course of research on this topic.

During fieldwork it became clear that there was certainly no extreme prudery among Thai informants. Among the farming population, with whom most of the research took place, there was no shame involved in mentioning, when circumstances called for it, what Firth calls "the instruments of life"⁵⁰. Our research centered upon religious practices, and various representations of the phallus were encountered in the course of this work. A huge phallic image was used during a monks' chant for rain. The symbol was sometimes seen in magical tattooing, and small boys sometimes carried a miniature phallus on a cord around their waist for magical protection. Small shrines can be found with a greater-than-life-size phallus, which were used by women asking for help with conception. Finally, huge wooden phalluses were used during a spirit possession ritual in the countryside⁵¹. All these facts serve to illustrate that excessive restraint in the depiction of the male generative organ is not the case in rural Thailand.

The meaning of the phallus in village life ranges from a direct reference to a sexual organ, as in the small fertility shrines, to a magically powerful symbol which can protect the wearer, such as in the case of the amulet and the tattoo. It is sometimes believed that the symbol wards off evil spirits, or that it provokes the gods to make rain. It is generally found to be an inappropriate symbol for the guardian spirit of the city. If a huge phallus were standing in the shrines of *cāawphôn lāg myan*, people would not be willing to bow their heads in deep reverence and address the spirit in an honorific manner.

To these observations is added that the city pillar does not even look like a phallus to the Thais. It lacks two distinguishing features: one of direction, the other of shape. When a phallus is placed in a fixed position, such as during a rain-making chant or in the small fertility shrine, it is placed not vertically like a pillar, but almost horizontally, sloping slightly upward. With regard to shape, the carving of the top always has a realistic slope. In marked contrast, *lāg myan*s are placed upright and their carving does not suggest that characteristic slope found at the end of the male organ (see figure 2).

Faced with the question what symbol the Thais readily associate with the ornamentation of the city pillar, the usual answer was that of a plant. The carving suggests often the lotus symbol, or the tip of the blossom of a banana tree, or sometimes the unopened jasmine flower⁵².

⁵⁰ R. Firth, *Symbols Public and Private* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1975 [1973]), p. 97.

⁵¹ See P. Nagranaad's article "Lián cāaw", *Sajjāmrād sàbdaawīcaan*, 9 May 1976, pp. 8-9, which also carries relevant illustrations.

⁵² For standard symbolic representations of these plants, see Chertchai Phetrathan, *Laajthaj* (Bangkok Odeon, 1970).

Therefore the Thais may deny phallic attributes to the city pillar, while in other contexts phallicism is made quite explicit. Whether the shape of the city pillar is subconsciously connected with a male symbol cannot be readily answered. The fact that outside observers sometimes so readily notice phallic aspects in the town pillar need not necessarily be seen as an indication of the existence of such a subconscious symbolism. After all, in many Western cultures the realistic depictions of phalluses have been strictly repressed, and it is possible that as a consequence a much wider range of representations serves there to convey the male idea

ANNEX

The legend of the shrine of Trat's city-pillar guardian spirits⁵³

It was in the time of Phra Nang Klao⁵⁴, in the year B.E. 2391⁵⁵ that the king ordered Chaophraya Bodindechanuchit⁵⁶ to lead an army and invade and subjugate Viet Nam, which was ruled by Song, who had arrogantly defeated the Khmers which were under Thai suzerainty. He also ordered Chaophraya Phrakhleng⁵⁷ to lead a naval force in support. When the latter reached Trat, the Vietnamese broke ranks and fled. King Nang Klao then ordered Chaophraya Phrakhleng to keep the naval force at Trat. During the period of peace that followed, Chaophraya Phrakhleng and his soldiers decided to build the Yothanimit monastery (Wat Bòod) to commemorate the expedition, and also they erected a city pillar.

With regard to the two city pillars, two persons are underneath who had been chosen to become guardian spirits. According to some old people, before the installation of the town pillar could take place, there was a public announcement that during the night some people would knock loudly on the doors and call on people to be town spirit. Naturally one should not answer back, for if one did, one would be sacrificed. Late that night, when all was quiet, those persons went out and rapped on the doors of the houses, but nobody answered until they reached the house of uncle Man and uncle Khong who answered and thus were taken to become the spirits of the town pillars. They were each seated in the two holes that had been dug. They were buried when the poles were put down and the holes filled with sand.

From that time onward all kinds of people have come to worship the town's guardian spirits, believing that these spirits provide protection and guidance as well as happiness. There is clear evidence of supernatural power. A convincing old man told us a story from the period

⁵³ Translation of a document; author noted below. I thank 'aacaan Wipudh Sobhavong for checking and correcting the translation; any remaining mistakes are my own.

⁵⁴ Rama III (1824-1851).

⁵⁵ A.D. 1848.

⁵⁶ Also known in the literature as Phraya Ratchasuphawadi, a name he carried earlier in his career. Chaophraya Bodindechanichit (sometimes spelt Bodinthondecha) was head of the Ministry of the Interior (Mahatthai) during most of Rama III's reign.

⁵⁷ The Minister of Foreign Affairs. Rama III relied heavily upon the duo formed by Chaophraya Bodindechanichit and Chaophraya Phrakhleng. For details see W.F. Vella, *Siam Under Rama III*, Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies No. IV (Locust Valley, J.J. Augustin, 1957), p. 7 *et passim*.

that the French occupied Trat⁵⁸. It was noticed by a French soldier how the inhabitants of Trat often went to pay their respects at the city pillar and how this could foster rebelliousness. In order to prevent this from happening he sent people to dig the pillars up. However, even with great effort, people could not succeed in getting them out of the earth. In the end the Frenchman had an elephant brought in to pull the pillars out with aid of a thick, strong chain wrapped around them. The elephant was made to pull, but again in vain. It only resulted in the town pillars leaning over just a bit. Finally the French soldier gave up his attempts and had to allow it to remain a spot where Trat's citizens could worship. Not long afterwards the Frenchman broke his neck, and the province of Trat was returned to Thailand. Phraya Wichayaa Thibodi, the Lord Lieutenant of Changwat Chanthaburi, then had the pillars repaired. It needed only two or three persons to push the poles to their precise former position. This is generally accepted as a miraculous event.

Every year Changwat Trat celebrates a city festival; it is a yearly offering which falls exactly on the sixth day of waxing moon of the sixth lunar month, which is the day of the establishment of the town pillars. The Chinese call it Hsiang Kung's birthday. On that day at dawn, Trat's people come and make merit by giving food to the monks in the grounds of the town pillars. They come to do this in great numbers. A little later in the day there is a ritual launching of a boat. Many food offerings are placed in a beautifully decorated boat. At an auspicious time they shoot a volley with the big ancient guns and simultaneously the boat is released in the Baangphrasung canal which runs behind the shrine of the guardian spirits. This ceremony is meant to dedicate a portion of merit to all ghosts, spirits and devils who lurk around and may disturb the peace and happiness of the householders. Also, all that is evil and bad is dispelled with the drifting boat that floats to the sea, sinks and disappears.

Compiled and freely distributed in order to honour the name of the guardian spirits of the city, by Mr. Kit Niranphanit, owner, manager and headmaster of the Kittiwitaya School, Changwat Trat.

⁵⁸ The French occupied parts of eastern Thailand in order to put pressure upon the Siamese government involving the border dispute which came to a head in 1893. It was not until April 1904 that the occupying troops were evacuated.