

## THE AMBROSIAL CONFECTION ๙๕๓๓๗๕

by

H. H. PRINCE BIDYALANKARAṆA

The Siamese sweetmeat here rendered in English as "Ambrosial Confection" may be traced back for many centuries in the literature of the country. Records of old Siam<sup>(1)</sup> contain references to it. Thus in the 13th and 14th centuries of the Christian era, when Siam had her capital at Sukhodaya, the making of the confection with its attendant ceremony was an event of considerable importance in the larger households. Both by King and people was the confection made and given to the monks, relatives and friends. The ceremony was, without doubt, an annual court function through the successive centuries of old Siam, being abandoned in times of war and stress only to be revived later on.

For the origin of the confection-making ceremony we must go deeply into folkore, perhaps back to the very early idea of "eating the god." In that idea the corn-spirit is represented in human or animal form, which is killed in the appropriate season and eaten sacramentally. While we must turn to the savages for modern examples of human representatives of the corn-spirit being eaten, unmistakable examples of the eating of its animal representatives at harvest meals may be found in many parts of Europe to-day. The corn-spirit, again, is represented as residing in the grain itself, and in most parts of the world, in civilized and uncivilized countries alike, traces may still be

(1) Nān Nabumās, a lady of the Court of ancient Sukhodaya, refers to the ceremony at some length in her Memoir of the Court Ceremonies of the period (เรื่องนางนพมาศ... Bangkok, B. E. 2468, pp. 89-93). The Memoir is undoubtedly a book of deep antiquity, but has suffered great damage at the hands of interpolators.

King Chulalongkorn also describes the sweetmeat-making in much detail in his articles "*Court Ceremonies of the Twelve Months*" (พระราชพิธีสิบสองเดือน..., Bangkok, B. E. 2463, พระราชพิธีเดือน ๑๐, *passim*). The ingredients of the confection, to which reference is made later on in this paper, have been given by His late Majesty (*ibid.*, pp. 618 et. seq.) from an official list which He examined evidently for the purpose of his articles.

found of the eating of the grain in which the corn-spirit is believed to reside.

At a later age, the notion of the corn-spirit residing in its representative is supplanted by the conception that the grains and other fruits of the earth are created by the gods as gifts to the earth's inhabitants. The sacramental eating of the crop thus gives place to the ceremony of offering to the gods the first fruits of human labour on the land. In this manner we have the Harvest Festival and Thanksgiving Service of the Christian Church of the present day.

The conception of the corn-spirit, or the thanksgiving to the gods for their gifts, is not associated with the ambrosial confection in Siam to-day. The belief for many centuries has been that the eating of the best kind of food prepared with elaborate ceremony contributes to the health and well-being of the consumer. The giving of alms to deserving donees is a meritorious act of the first magnitude, and in the Buddhist Books reference is made to the Buddha himself being offered and accepting food similar to the confection which forms the subject of this paper. In Siam, a Buddhist country, the most deserving almsmen are the Buddhist monks. Hence the Brethren are brought into the confection-making ceremony, first for the benefit which their auspicious presence confers on the undertaking, and secondly, to receive the food after it has been prepared.

The making of the confection at court involves elaborate preparation. The ingredients are numerous, for they are intended to include every kind of grain, seed, root and fruit available in the season. The writer has counted sixty-three ingredients in a list, which in spite of the number has *etcetera* in it. The quantity of the ingredients may be gauged from the size and number of the pans used to cook the confection. The pans are round-bottomed, roughly a yard in diameter and a foot deep, and there are eight of them.

On the day appointed for the ceremony,<sup>(1)</sup> the ingredients in their respective holders are brought together in one place, and the sacred thread is passed round them. The task of stirring the food in the process of cooking is entrusted to thirty-two virgins, who being suitably attired and sitting together, have the same sacred thread passed round their heads. The young ladies are usually princesses and descendants of royalty. During the first reign of the present Dynasty, the young ladies were daughters of the King.

---

(1) In the tenth month.

A chapter of monks have been invited, and everything is now ready in the royal hall. On the arrival of the King, a proclamation is read to the assembly to the effect that whereas His Majesty has deemed it expedient to maintain (or revive) the ancient ceremony of making the ambrosial confection, it behoves all those taking part in it to pay attention to their allotted tasks in the spirit of kindness and charity; may our faith in the Buddha and his Teaching, and in the Brethren who perpetuate that Teaching, bring health and happiness to the King, prosperity to the country and the people, and so on. At the conclusion of the reading, the monks, holding one end of the sacred thread in their hands, recite praises of the Three Gems, and also passages from the sacred Books. After the recitation, the monks bless the King and retire. His Majesty now pours holy water on the heads of the virgins and anoints them, after which they are conducted to their appointed stations. The King next repairs to a courtyard in the palace which has been prepared for the actual cooking, and the thirty-two virgins take their places on raised seats round the eight pans, four to each. The cooking now commences. Water, milk, butter, fruit-juices and other liquids are poured into the pans, and the other ingredients, which have been cut up, pounded or otherwise prepared, are put in and mixed together. The young ladies now begin to stir, the orchestra in attendance playing throughout the ceremony. The work of the young ladies is light as long as the food remains liquid, but when it begins to thicken the task of thoroughly stirring the contents of the pans becomes increasingly heavy. His Majesty soon takes his departure, and the young ladies gratefully hand their work over to strong men. The latter are rewarded with portions of the sweetmeat after the conclusion of their work.

The confection is served to the King at dinner the same evening. Next morning the monks attend again and are given food and other presents by the King. Portions of the confection are now presented to members of the royal family, to the nobility and other officials, and of course to the monks.<sup>(1)</sup>

The above is a brief description of the ambrosial confection-making ceremony. It is not a regular annual function nowadays.

---

(1) The sweetmeat will keep almost indefinitely on account of the preserving quality of some of its ingredients.



