

Pl. I

A fish (*Plu Bäk*) caught in the river Me Khong near Vieng Chandr. in B. E. 2472. The fish is lying on its side. The man standing by the head is Phra Pradum, the Commissioner of Nong Khai, who attended the preliminary ceremonies and saw the fish caught.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE CEREMONIES AND RITES PERFORMED WHEN
 CATCHING THE PLA BUK (ปลาขี้ก) A SPECIES OF CATFISH
 INHABITING THE WATERS OF THE RIVER ME KHONG
 (แม่น้ำโขง) THE NORTHERN AND EASTERN
 FRONTIER OF SIAM

by

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Introduction.

The rites and observances recorded in this paper must be of great antiquity. They are purely animistic and lack all Brahmin and Buddhist influence. There is only one place where Vishnu is referred to, and in the Siamese text the word Phya Thorn (พญาธร) is used which may mean simply the Spirits having power to move in the air. The people of the present generation believe this word to refer to Vishnu. Brahminism would seem to have extended its influence to this region some 2000 years back, but probably did not affect the everyday life of the people. This lack of Brahminical influence leads me to suppose that the ceremonial and observances used in connection with the catching of the Pla Buk must go back several thousand years.

The belief amongst the people that the Spirits who have to be propitiated and whose favour must be obtained are Kah (กา) and that Seng is an incarnation of a Kah Spirit is further evidence of the great antiquity of this festival. The rites and observances connected with the driving of elephants and the hunting of the wild ox, accounts of which I have published in the JSS, vol. XXIII, part 2 and vol. XXVII, part 1, are redolent with Brahminical and Buddhist influences. The territory in which elephant and wild ox are hunted

is no great distance from the Golden Basin, where the Pla Bük are caught, in fact all these three acts are performed in the region known as the Korat plateau (โคราช) which is bounded by the river Me Khong.

Attention is drawn to the belief of the people that the Chief Spirit of the waters has found his home in the bodies of the ancestors of Seng (แสน) from the earliest days to the present time. The Spirit is now living as Ta Seng (ตาสั่ง) a local official of the district of Hawm (ห้วยม); in fact, Ta Seng is an incarnation of the ancient Kah Spirit. It is probable that the Kah people occupied this territory in early times, but were dislodged by the irruption into the Valley of the Me Khong of the Lao, which certainly commenced 2000 years ago. Many Kah tribes still live in the vicinity of the Me Khong. They were an important race at one time and were probably the ancestors of the present day Khmer (เขมร) and Mon (มอญ).

At the present time a good deal of freedom and licence is allowed to the people who gather together for the purpose of catching these fish. The custom of using abusive language, which forms a part of the ceremonial, leads me to suppose that in ancient times much greater licence was observed, in fact, the festival probably approximated somewhat to the ceremonial of the Bacchanalian orgies. Amongst some of the people of this region great sexual freedom is allowed after the harvesting of the crop. It will be noticed that the theme of abuse is one relating entirely to sexual matters.

The Lake of Tali mentioned by Dr. Smith is situated in Western Yunnan. The ancient capital of the Thai and Lao people, known as Nanchao, is situated on the banks of this lake. The Thai and Lao, or perhaps I had better say the Siamese, know this lake as Nawng Se (หนองแสน.) Dr. Credner has published in the JSS, vol. xxvii, part 1, an interesting account of his exploration of this lake and the ancient capital of Nanchao.

1st April, 1935.

1. Lying between Vieng Chandr (เวียงจันทร์) on the left bank, and Amphur Ta Baw (ท่าบ่อ) in the province of Nong Khai (หนองคาย) on the right bank of the river Me Khong (แม่น้ำโขง), is found a deep pool in which the Pla Bük (ปลาบึก), a species of Catfish congregate. This pool is close to the village of Sæn Pa (แสนป่า) on the Siamese bank, and in front of the village of Ang Ta Seng (อ่างตามแสง) on the French bank. This pool has been honoured with the name of Ang Tong Nong Chao (อ่างทองหนองจ้าว) which means the Golden Basin, the Lord's lake. It is surrounded by rocky hills, those on the right bank called Pan (พาน) and on the left bank Panang (พานัง), the wall. During the months of July to September navigation is quite impossible as the pool itself becomes a dangerous whirlpool. The water channel is on the right side of the river. In the third month, February—March, the water in the pool is quiet and has a depth of sixty metres.

Having briefly sketched the topography of the pool, I propose to give a short description of the fish itself. A note written by the renowned ichthyologist, Dr. Hugh McCormick Smith, is appended to this paper. The Pla Bük is in appearance like the Pla Te Po (ปลาเทโพ) with two differences namely, that the Pla Bük has not the black spot on the ears and is devoid of teeth. This fish is of a light grey colour on the back, and white on the belly. It has no scales; its heart is very small, being only two inches in size, and is situated near the throat. The fish is easily killed, a thrust with a pointed piece of wood on the head causing death. These fish attain to a length of slightly over 3 metres with a girth of 2 metres. The male is long and thin, and the female is of stouter build with a large abdomen. The Pla Bük are in roe, according to local tradition, in the first and second months, January and February, but I have seen one caught at Chiengsen (เชียงแสน) late in July in roe, and bought its eggs. The roe is contained in two bags or cauls; the eggs are quite small. Tradition has it that the fish in the Golden Basin are those which lived there permanently whose numbers are augmented by migration from downstream in the sixth month, May—June, and that their habitat is in the great Lake in Cambodia.

Pla Bük are found in all parts of the river Me Khong and I have seen them at the mouths of the Nam Mul (น้ำมูล) near Suwanwari (สุวรรณภูมิ) in the Province of Ubol (อุบล), and also at Chiengsen, a considerable distance above Luang Prabang (หลวงพระบาง). They have also been caught in the Nam Kok (น้ำตก) near Chiengsen. The places known to be the habitat of the Pla Bük are as follows, starting from Kemarat (เขมราฐ) and going up the river.

(a) These fish are abundant in the great pools of the rapids of Kemarat (Lipi) (เขมราฐ). It is said that some of these pools have a depth of 600 metres. The water is so turbulent that the fish cannot be caught;

(b) They are found and caught without ceremony in the sixth month at Don Tamngern (ดอนตมเนิน) in the Amphur of Mukdahan (มุกดาหาร) in the province of Nakhon Panom (นครพนม);

(c) Near the village of Nong Kung (หนองกุ้ง) which lies opposite the mouth of the river Namngim (น้ำงึม) in the amphur of Phon Pisai (โพนพิสัย) province of Nakhon Panom (นครพนม). The fish are caught here in the third month without ceremony, the catch being about three fish;

(d) Near the rapids of Ah Hong (แก่งอาฮง) in the amphur of Chaiburi (ไชยบุรี), province of Nong Khai (หนองคาย). There is no ceremony. The haul is about three;

(e) Near the village of Ban Tad Serm (บ้านตาดเสี้ยว) Amphur Tabaw (ท่าบ่อ), province of Nong Khai, some 12 miles above the famous Golden Basin, is found a small pool called Ang Noi (อ่างน้อย). The water in this pool is deep and the pool is surrounded by rocky hills which project into the main waterway of the river. The Pla Bük are said to make this pool a home and their numbers are replenished by fish going upstream. About twenty seine boats are employed in this fishery. The catching follows the great ceremonial fishing in the Golden Basin, and is carried out by the people themselves without ceremony. The catch is about six;

(f) Near the village of Ban Nong (บ้านหนอง) is a lake called Nong Chieng San (หนองเชียงสัน) in Siamese territory which is formed by the waters of the Me Khong leaving the main channel. This

lake is about 40 miles below Chieng Khan (เชียงใหม่) and opposite the village of Kok Hai (กอกไฮ) in the province of Vieng Chandr. The Spirit of this lake must be propitiated with right and proper ceremony before the people can commence fishing ;

(g) At the village of Ta Ban Wang (ท่าบ้านวัง), province of Vieng Chandr (เมืองจันทร์), near Kok Pai (กอกไผ่) in tambol Hat Kam (ตำบลหาดคำ), Amphur Chieng Kan (เชียงใหม่) ;

(h) At Don Khai (ดอนไช้) about a mile above Chieng Kan is found a pool where the fish are caught in the sixth month when ascending the river, without any ceremony ;

(i) The fish are caught in Luang Prabang (หลวงพระบาง) territory when ascending the river in roe, in the sixth month, in the same manner as at Chieng Sen.

2. Each year at the season of the falling of the waters, the people living in the vicinity of the Golden Basin, the home of the Pla Bük, join together for the purpose of catching these fish. The observances rites and ceremonies in connection with this catching, commence on the 8th waxing of the 3rd month, and continue till the 12th waxing. The netting of these fish is carried out from dawn to mid-day everyday, from the 12th to the 15th waxing of the moon. When the left bank of the river Me Khong was under the jurisdiction of Siam, the Chief Spirit of the Waters and the Chief Spirit of the Locality were invoked by those in authority to assist at this important function. Since the left bank was handed over to France the Lao Chief of Vieng Chandr has presided over the ceremony. The ceremonies connected with the taking of these fish are ancient and have been performed from time immemorial, and carried out once a year.

3. There are several important Spirit Chiefs who have the duty of guarding over that portion of the river Me Khong in the vicinity of the Golden Basin in the Spirit Lake, who must be propitiated by offerings of food and drink in order to obtain their help and favour, before the catching of the fish can take place. There are four important Spirit shrines, the Spirit inhabiting which, must be propitiated. These shrines are situated in the following districts :—

The Spirit of Siri Mangala has his shrine at Vieng Chandr.

The Spirit known as the Golden Swan (หงส์คำ) has his shrine in the province of Vieng Chandr, at the village Kau Leo Ta Seng (แก้งลำบัว)

ตามสง), in the tambol of Si Kai (สี่ไค). This village Kau Leo Ta Seng is opposite Ban Mor (บ้านหม้อ) or Don Ching Chu (ดอนชิงชู), tambol Sri Chiengmai, in Ampur Tabaw (ท่าบ่อ), on the right bank.

The Spirit Chao Dan (เจ้าด่าน), he of the Guard House, has his shrine in the province of Vieng Chandr, at the village of Hin Siu (หินสือ), Tambol Si Kai on the left bank. This village lies opposite the village of Kok Sork (โคกซอก), Tambol Sri Chiengmai, Amphur Tabaw (ท่าบ่อ), on the right bank.

The Spirit of the Golden Basin in the Spirit Lake has his altar or shrine at the pool itself.

On the morning of the 8th waxing of the moon, in the 3rd month, the people who intend to go to the Golden Basin to catch the Pla Bük must first go to the village of Hawm (ห้อม), about 12 miles below the town of Vieng Chandr. This is done because the chief of the village, a man named Ta Seng (ตามสง) is the present day embodiment or incarnation of the Chief Spirit of the Waters. This Spirit, a Kah (ชา), has found a carnate home for centuries past in the bodies of the ancestors of Seng. He calls up all the Spirits from the lower reaches of the river, and when they have come, the people prepare a feast, at which the Spirits are fed. After this feast they are all invited to accompany the fishing party to the Golden Basin, in order that they may protect the fishers from all dangers and give them a good catch. The offerings consist of one loin cloth for a male Spirit and a sin (ซิ่น) or skirt for a female, five portions of betel nut and leaves prepared for eating, twelve leaf cups of flowers, a pair of bracelets, and a pair of earplugs or rings, one or two fowls, a dish of sweetmeats. The party, after the feast, moves up the river to Ban Suan Mon (บ้านสวนมอน), the pleasure garden of Ta Seng, in the tambol of Hawm, about three miles below Vieng Chandr, opposite Hua Sai (หัวทราย), Amphur Tabaw (ท่าบ่อ) on the Siamese bank. The boats form a procession and move up the river stopping at Tana (ตะนา) and Pak Sai (ปากไส) to feed the Spirits and then go on to Ban Suan Mon, where another feast is prepared for these Spirits. The party spends the night there.

On the morning of the 9th waxing of the month the boats move up to Kok Kham (โคกคำ) and Chao Had Sai Mul (เจ้าหาดทรายมูล)

opposite Ban Pan Prao (บ้านพานพร้าว). At each of these places the guardian Spirits are propitiated and the procession then goes to the town of Vieng Chandr. On arrival at the landing, the party proceeds to the Shrine of Siri Mangala (ศรีวิมงคล), the Spirit of Blessed Happiness, where, after making respectful obeisance, and giving homage, offerings are presented. The party passes the night here. The shrine is situated at the mouth of Huey Cham Pa Sakdi (ห้วยจำปาศักดิ์). Siri Mangala is a very powerful Spirit and he is invited to enter the fleshy form of a female medium known as Nang Thiem (นางเทียม). This medium is dressed in a red skirt, a red coat, and a red turban, and makes offerings of candles, incense tapers, spirits and sweetmeats, inviting the Spirit to enter within her. Musicians play on reed pipes the tune of the song Sudsanen (สุตตะสมเนน) inviting the spirit to enter the medium. Nang Thiem lights the candle and places herself in a sitting posture holding in her hand a bowl with candles and incense tapers, motionless. When the candle becomes dim, and the flame flickers, it is evidence that the Spirit Siri Mangala has entered his fleshy home. When Nang Thiem begins to tremble, she places the bowl on the ground, rises and dances. In addition to the medium there is a second person, the familiar of the Spirit who looks after him and supplies his wants, known as the Cham (จ้ำ). This person asks Siri Mangala, when in possession of the medium, to grant favour to the party, fishing in the Golden Basin, and enquires whether the catch will be a good one this year. Nang Thiem replies that the catch will be fair, and more abundant than last year, but that a right and proper feast according to ancient custom must be prepared for the Spirits. The questioner asks what are the requirements of ancient custom. The medium replies that the food prepared shall not be contaminated by any person putting in bits of meat or fish, or by any one smelling the food or partaking thereof before the Spirit Hong Kam (ฮงคำ) or Golden Swan has been fed. After this the cooks and the givers of the feast may eat. The possessor of the Spirit then calls on Siri Mangala to leave the body of the medium and invites him to accompany the fishing party to the Golden Basin. Nang Thiem, the medium is paid sixteen atts (a quarter of a tical) a

flowered loincloth, two green coconuts, one bunch of bananas, nine couples of candles and incense tapers, for her services.

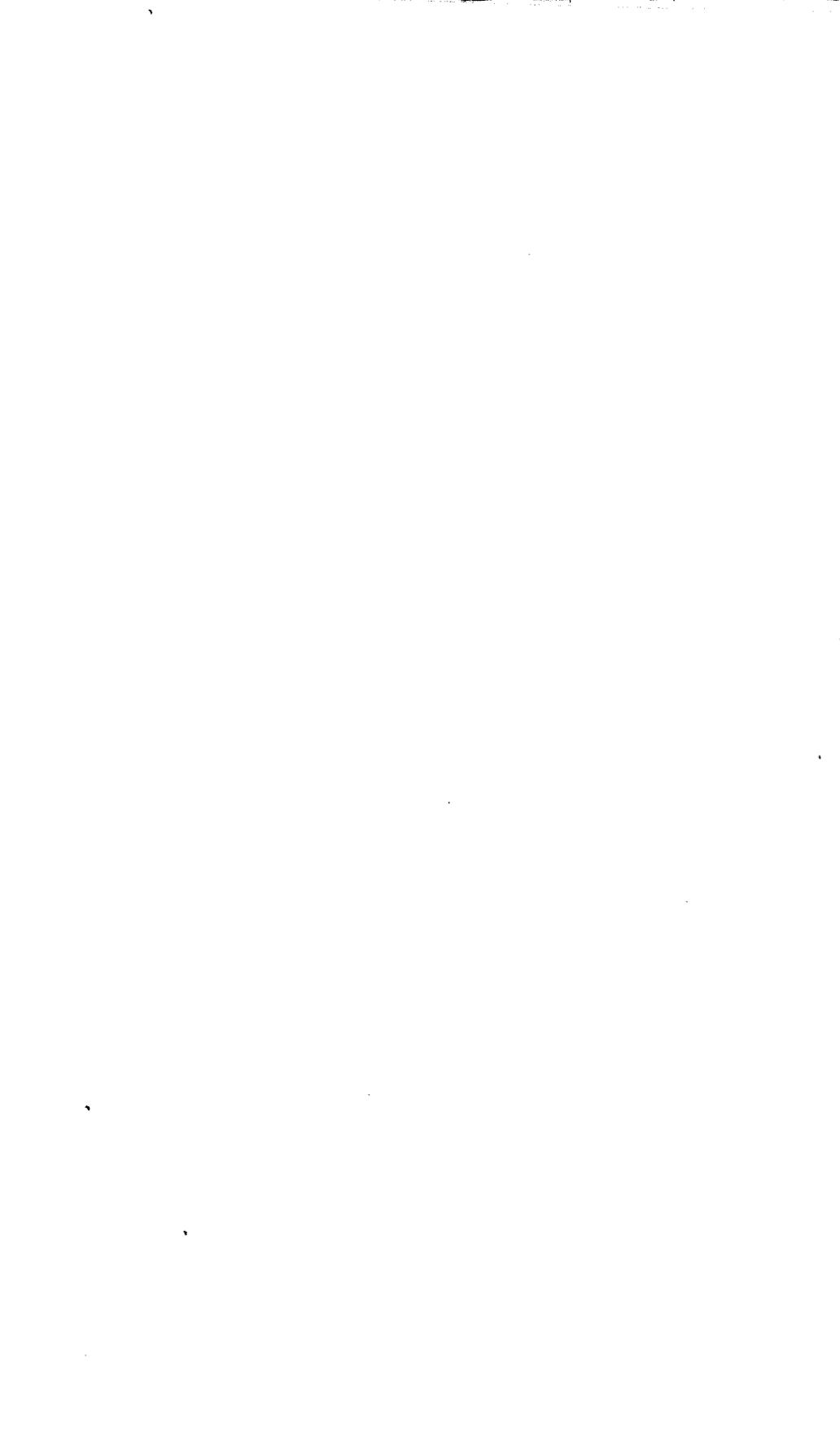
4. At day-break on the 10th waxing of the month, the boats leave Vieng Chandr in procession and go up the river towards the Golden Basin. On the way up-stream it is necessary to stop and propitiate by making offerings to the Spirit Yaya (ยาย), Mother of the Spirit of Hat Mul (หาดมูล), Tambol Si Kai (สี่ไค) at North Tana, and also at Huey Vichaya (หัววิชัย). On arrival at Kao Leo (แก้วเลี้ยง) the nine bends, offerings are made to the Spirit of the Golden Swan. These offerings, for two successive years take the form of a pig, changed to a buffalo in the third year, and this rotation continues without alteration. These animals are slaughtered at one o'clock in the afternoon. The head, the fore feet, and the tail together with sandalwood flowers, candles, and incense tapers are placed on a salver, which the familiar of this Spirit called the Cham, takes to the Shrine and offers to the Spirit Saying:—

“We thy slaves, people of the country, come together to make offerings to thee, Chao Pawm Hua (เจ้าป้อมหัว) chief of all the Spirits, and respectfully invite thee to partake of our feast prepared for thee. The time has now arrived for us to enter on the important business of catching the fish in the Golden Basin, and we beg thee to grant us thy protection and thy favour that we may net many fish.”

Later on, additional oblations are offered to the Spirit at this shrine. These offerings consist of nine different kinds of food, a dish of each is placed on a salver. These dishes consist of lab (ลาบ), raw meat pickled with fish sauce, toasted meat (เนื้อปิ้ง), a curry (แกง), boiled tripe (ต้มเครื่องใน), fried tripe, a kind of broth (ต้มข้าว), toasted liver (ตับปิ้ง), a kind of prawn salad (แกงปู), spirits, a glass or bottle. These articles are known as the nine offerings and are taken by the Cham, Spirit Possessor, to the Shrine where they are offered up, being placed on the altar. The Cham says:—

“We thy slaves, people of the country, coming together, invite thee to partake of the good things prepared by us. The time has now arrived for us to enter on the important business of catching the fish in the Golden Basin, and we beg thee to grant us thy protection and thy favour, that we may net many fish.”

During the act of presentation of the nine offerings the Nang Thiem (medium) puts on her red dress, lights the candles and incense





PL. II

The same fish as on pl. I lying on its stomach.

tapers, and these, with sandalwood flowers, she, holding in her hands, makes reverential obeisance before the shrine and invites the spirit Golden Swan to enter within her. The musicians play an entrancing air, the tune of Sudsanen, on reed pipes. The medium sits immobile with the bowl containing the candles and incense tapers in her hands. She soon begins to tremble and then places the bowl on the ground, rises and dances. The Spirit, has now taken possession of her. The Cham asks the Spirit, calling him the Lord of All, what will be the number of the catch. The Spirit replies that if the fishers act in a right and proper way the catch will be numerous, but if their behaviour falls below the proper standard the catch will be small, that you may not return home empty handed with your feelings bruised and hurt. The Cham then enquires what constitutes a right and proper manner. The reply is: Act in accordance with the best traditions of the ceremony. The Cham then invites the Spirit to leave the medium and join the fishing party. The food prepared as oblation to the Spirit is now eaten by the throng and the people pass the night on the spot.

At dawn on the 11th waxing of the month, the boats leave the "Nine Bends" and proceed further up river, stopping at Pak Mul (ปากมูล) and Huey Hawm (หัวหิน) where offerings are made to the local Spirits. When the boat procession arrives at this place in the afternoon, the Cham, taking offerings of pork, duck and fowl flesh, presents this food to the Spirit of the Guard House (เจ้าด่าน), whose shrine is at Hin Siu (หินสิ่ว). There is no ceremonial of inviting the Spirit to enter the medium; the Cham merely pays his respects to the Spirit, and informs him that the party is going to the Golden Basin for the yearly fishing. The Spirit being in charge of the Guard House cannot desert his duties for he must remain on guard. The party camps here for the night, where gambling is indulged in till the break of day. A large number of people from the surrounding districts with their boats await the ceremonial procession at this spot, in order to accompany the party to the Golden Basin, which they dare not enter without the Lord of the Waters (the Lao Chief of Vieng Chandr) leading the way. At dawn of the 12th waxing of the month, the Lao Chief of Vieng Chandr known as the Lord of the Waters, who will preside over the fishing ceremony leads the way in his state barge, followed by all the other boats to the

Golden Basin. He stops at Kawn Sa Hua (ก๊อสนสระหัว) and the Kut Kawng Li (กุดก๊อถ้งลี่) and makes propitiatory offerings to the resident spirits.

From where the boats are moored, a post of Mai Chalao (ไม้เฒ่า) fixed on a sand bank can be seen. The Cham or Spirit Possessor takes some pork, duck and fowl flesh, and makes an offering of these things without any ceremonial to the Spirit Guardian of the gate at this post. He merely pays his respects and informs the Spirits of the intention to open the Golden Basin and catch the Pla Bük. This Spirit, also on guard, cannot accompany the fishing party.

5. At 2 o'clock in the afternoon the Cham or Spirit Possessor prepares food, candles, incense tapers and sandalwood flowers for presentation to the shrine of the Spirit of the Golden Basin. This shrine, which is situated in a building called locally the Pam Sai (พามไซ), is approached with great ceremonial. A procession of boats is formed. These boats convey in state: two swords, two water gourds, two trays with betel-nuts and leaves, nine pieces of silver (ยี่สิบย), four pieces of bee's wax (ยี่สิบย), two green coconuts, two dishes of sweetmeats, nine pairs of candles, incense tapers and sandalwood flowers, one gong and two flutes, to this building. The Nang Thiem dressed in red as before, beats the gong and plays on a flute in the procession. When the shrine is reached, the Cham lights the candles and incense tapers and, making reverential obeisance, places them with the food on the shrine, saying:—

“Today, thy humble slave craves permission to pay homage to thee, Lord of this place, Chief Spirit of all. I beg thee to allow the people to net the fish, and that their efforts be rewarded by a plentiful catch. I, thy slave have brought coconuts (ขี้เฒ่า), sweet bananas, betelnuts and leaves, pork (or buffalo flesh) and spirits as gifts for thee. If and when fish are caught, I will present two to thee, cut off their heads and pickle them, giving this food to thee.”

During the ceremony, the musicians play on their instruments and the Cham continues to speak to the Spirit saying:—

“I have now brought the people and their rulers to the Golden Basin in the Spirit Lake, and now invite the Mother and the Father of the Basin Spirit to proceed to the shrine in the Pam Sai. When fish have been caught, I will present thee with fish, prepared for eating with spirituous liquors at the morning meal.”

The ceremony of invitation having been performed the Father and Mother of the Golden Basin Spirit are brought in procession to the shrine accompanied by music. At the Pam Sai everything has been prepared to receive these Spirits: mats have been spread, a dais has been arranged on which is placed one pillow, nine coats, nine pieces of silk, nine skirts (ซิ่น), nine pieces of white cloth, a bottle of spirits with tumblers. A lamp is lit and the place screened by curtains. A vast concourse of people is gathered here to receive the Spirits, and eagerly await the arrival of the procession. These Spirits are invited to take up their residence in the Pam Sai, the insignia appropriate to their rank is brought in a State barge, landed and placed by the side of the shrine where two Chams are on guard duty.

6. The actual business of catching the fish commences at five o'clock in the morning just before the break of day, the 13th waxing of the month, and therefore begins at the close of the 12th waxing and ceases at mid-day on the 15th. (A day in this part of the world commences and closes at dawn, not from mid-night to mid-night). No one dare contravene the convention laying down the period during which fish may be caught, for if they did, such a breach would bring ill fortune in its train.

7. Each fisherman has a boat made from the trunk of a tree having a breadth of 1 metre and a length of 10. Boats made of wood having eyes in the grain of lucky portent, such as Ta Song Taw (ตาส่งต้อ), "speeding the pole," Ta Sawt Nguak (ตาสอดแห่อก), "threading the gills," Tu Wat Hua (ตาวัดหัว), "cutting off heads," are selected. The nets used are very strong and made of ropes about the thickness of a thumb with meshes of 50 centimetres square. These nets are the short kind, having a width of 6 metres and the length of 10. The manipulating ropes are 66 metres long. The weights are stones, weighing about 6 pounds each. Three or four ropes made of tough creepers (เครือขม) are also provided. The crew of each boat consists of two men, one for the bow and one for the stern. However, before these boats can be used they are subjected to a ceremony of purification, which includes the cleansing of the hull by fire. Homage is paid to the Goddess of the boat, the Lady Spirit (แม่เจ้าหนว้) by presenting fresh flowers, and incense tapers in leaf bowls. These offerings are fixed to the bow of the boats which is honoured by the sign symbolical of the Holy Trinity being

made with scented powder. (This sign, เฌิม, which is a protective one consists, of three dots, or in some cases more, so placed as to form a triangle). Offerings of food must be made to the Spirit of the boats, and he who makes these offerings promises that they shall consist of such articles of food as the Spirit delights in. They are fowls, eggs, fish paste, frogs and sweetmeats. The Spirit of the boat signifies what she would like to eat by making the rope which ties up the boat vibrate. Some of the seine boats are purified by the owner, seizing a live fowl by the legs and using this as a brush, striking the boat from stern to bow till the bird is dead.

The people believe that the seine boats and the seine nets are endowed with life, in fact are spirits, are living things, and it is for this reason that these boats are purified, and the boats, nets, ropes and stone weights are perfumed with scent. The stone weights are then attached to the nets which are now ready for use. An incantation is used when this is being done. This incantation is:—

อมนุมาฬุ, ติตตัง พันขัง กุมาริตต๊ะหุม

Which means:

“Om, let all things of all kinds love us, be attached firmly as with cement, bound tightly to us, attracted by that power to cause to love, inherent in us, possessed by maidens all.”

The ceremony of purification is performed in the following manner and these incantations are used:—

อม พก ๆ พาย ๆ เชือกนชอควดำขาว กกข้ายาว ผู้สำนวนอนตากได้
งานนชายเมือตะวันตก กกมนชายเมือตะวันออก ดอกมันดอกพระญาไฟ
ไบมันไบพระญาเงือก เป็ดอกมันเป็ดอกพระญาจร ขอนมันเปนรูปไม้ ดิน
ได้ตัวได้แหดัง ปูนสมันไบสำนคุ่มส์คือ พ้อมนมันเขาได้งาเหล็ก เหน็ก
บ่อนไค หันไคพอหันฮ้อดหวง ปานพาย้องเดือนหก เลียงหนึ่งนไนปก
เมืองหม่าน เลียงหนึ่งนไนปกฟากของ เลียงหนึ่งนไนหยอกสำวหาม
เลียงหนึ่งนไนภามสำวเฒ่า อม ส๊ะหะมะภาพ.

“Om, earth, earth, paddle, paddle. This my boat is named Ku Khua Lam Khao (คูข้ายดำขาว) (white boat stern and bow). My boat is long. A virgin can lie in it as though lying on one’s lap. Its stern points back to

striped. I restore, I brush aside (the evil Spirit). Dead, by act of Spirit cutting with sword. I restore, I brush aside (the evil Spirit). I slice in bits the Spirit's head. Om, let harmony reign supreme."⁽¹⁾

The incantation used when perfuming the boats, nets, ropes, and weights is as follows:—

อม หัวสองเฮ้า หอมเท่าทวเมือง หอมเฮื่องทวพา นานานัง ๆ วาสาภา
 ไล้ เขาโทหยุดเกาะ สิบทุ่งไฮให้มั่งแต่นมาหา สิบทุ่งนาให้มั่งแต่นมาสู่
 อยไม้ไต้ร้องให้หาญ สิบหัวแต่นมาเข้า แก้วหัวแต่นมาโฮม เสิญมาโฮมใน
 ทวปอนน มากินพาเข้า เจ้าเพินเสถย อม สะหะมะภาพ.

"Om, word of God. O, scented bulb of creeper black, perfuming all lands and sky. O, fields and ploughs, the rainy season has passed away. The time has come for thee to stop thy work. Ten highland rice fields and ten lowland fields shall run to me. By virtue of my magic they cannot remain where they are, but crying, will run to me. Ten bulbs of the scented creeper will come and enter on the place and another nine will also come and join with them. O, please come, assemble on this land. Partake of the feast prepared. The Lord the Chief shall eat from the greater tray. Om, let harmony reign supreme."

When this incantation is being pronounced, the Master of Ceremonies shall pick up the net by holding the four corners in his hands, that is the two weighted and the two unweighted corners, and when doing so must suppress his breath. When the boats and nets have

(1) In vol. xxv, part 2 of the JSS, I published a paper dealing with the Rites and Ceremonies observed at Elephant driving operations in the sea-board province of Lang Suan, Southern Siam. In phase III of this paper, I described the rites which have to be performed when cutting timber to be used for the erection of the kraal. The incantations quoted above all refer to the cutting of timber for making boats. The Spirits inhabiting the trees must be evicted to prevent their doing any evil after the boat has been built. It will be observed that the chief of all the Spirits, the father of the trees must be confined and for this purpose he is placed in a fishing trap. This simile is used because the boats are employed in the important business of catching the Pla Bük. The leather rowlock have been also to be purified. The evil Spirit living within the same must be brushed aside, for if they were allowed to remain the rowlocks would break and evil fall on the fishermen. Evil Spirits are responsible for killing the trees required for making the boats. They must be brushed aside that the trees may come to life again. The people who engage in the pursuit of fishing in the Golden Basin have the belief that the boats they use are endowed with life, hence these death dealing Spirits must be removed.

been purified and perfumed, they should not be used for any purpose whatsoever, until the time fixed for catching the fish has arrived, when they should be brought out and used forthwith.

As some fish may break away from the Golden Basin and try to escape, parties of fishermen assemble at Ban Sam Pan Na (บ้านสามพันนา) near the Si No Hat (สี่โน้ต) rapids in Vieng Chandr territory, where a sand bank juts out from the left bank of the river. Other parties assemble at Hard Mul (หาดมูล) opposite Huey Hawm (ห้วยห้อม) on the left bank, lying between Ban Kok Sok (บ้านโคกซอก) and Ban Ta Phra Badh (ท่าพระบาท) in the commune of Sri Chiangmai (ศรีเชียงใหม่), Amphur Ta Baw (ท่าบ่อ). Ban Sam Pan Na is above and Hat Mul is below the Golden Basin. The fishermen use long nets made by joining seven of the ordinary nets together, producing a net 35 metres long, and the weights weigh between five and six pounds. The incantations used for the short nets are used for the long also.

8. Before the boats are brought out to commence the operations of catching the fish, some of the fishermen pronounce this incantation, but this is not done by all.

วณนวณคคณต ขอดอกขอดวง เจานาเจาทา เจาบาเจาเมือง ผด่าง
 ทงททาย บ้าไฟไก่อ้น ให้มาอยู่มากิน देंวักจกกระตน ในวณนผู้ชา
 จการหมานตาก ขอหวอวางหางมอบ เจาด่าน เจาท ให้มโซคมชยใน
 วณนเกิด.

"This day, this night is good, pregnant with good fortune. We beg thee to give us in abundance, O, Lord of the waters, Lord of the Landing and Lord of the Forests, Lord of the city and all Spirits great and small. The cocks are crowing in the forest before dawn. Please come to our feast prepared as an offering to ye all. To-day, we thy humble slaves pray that we may be favoured with good fortune, and in return for thy kindness will give to ye the head and tail of a fish. O, Guardians of the frontiers and of the countryside, grant us thy favour on this day."

At five o'clock on the morning of the 12th waxing of the month, each boat is brought out and paddled into the Golden Basin, going towards its upper reaches. In each boat are two men each one holding the upper corners of the net which is lowered into the water.

"Now we beg that the catch may abundant be, O, Spirit of the Waters and the great Sandbank. We beg the same of thee, O, Spirit of the Golden Basin, Lake of the Lord. Please open all the cavern doors that the fish may come out. Please give us our reward."

9. During the process of fishing a great uproar is created by all those present who indulge in abusing each other and shouting out challenges to fight. While the owners of the boats beg the fish to enter their nets saying:—

ให้ทานเจ้าเขื่อนให้ทาน ภูผาทานอ่างทองหนองเจ้า ผู้เป็นเจ้าอยู่หาด
ทรายหวดง ฮาดญาหวดงผู้เป็นเจ้าของา มดด้งชาชอดอกชอดวง.

"Give, O, Father Possessor of Plenty, give O, Cliff-faced rocks, O, Golden Basin, Lake of the Lord, O, Ye Chief, living on the great sand bank, O, Thou Great One, owner of the Golden Basin, now give us of thy plenty."

Many of the tribes who have come South have passed through this province from Sze-Chuan and Shen-Si, notably the Miao. The country La Nam would seem to be situated in the bowels of the earth, but not far below the surface. In the Lanchang (ล้านช้าง) chronicals, it is stated that a king bearing the title of Phya Lanam Sen Thai Puwamad (พระยาล้านช้างแสนไทยภูวนารถ) ascended the throne. Lanchang was a name given to both Luang Prabang and Viengchandr, but as the capital was removed from the (former) place in the year A. D. 1565 it is probable that the Phya Lanam referred to was king of Luang Prabang. Lanam was known to the people of the country hence the use of this name in the incantation. This incantation is used for the purpose of coaxing the fish to come to the nets. It is usual to stir the water with long bamboo poles, hence the reference to the male organ of generation. The reverend teacher well versed in magic, curses the fish, that they, being overcome by fear, will approach the nets by the right way. It will also be noticed that it is necessary to call on the Spirits to open the cavern doors to let the fish come out. This is analogous to the opening of forests caves and subterranean passages. A good instance of this requirement will be found in my paper *The catching of Elephants in the Province of Langsuan*, phase VIII, published in JSS, vol. xxv, part II.

The first few lines of this incantation are not very clear. The men apparently are covered with sweat due to their exertions in navigating the boats and preparing the nets. That passage which refers to paying honour to the boats that they may be fruitful is an ordinary custom which requires that flowers etc. should be placed on the bow of the boat. See details given in paragraph 5 of this paper.

This prayer is repeated until the fish are caught in the nets. When a fish is netted, the boat goes down stream. The two men holding the net jerk it as a signal calling on the fish to come to the surface saying:—

เจ้าขึ้นมาเจ้าเฮือนขึ้นมา เอหางขนกอน บัดดียอนเครือแดงคกง
 บัดดีปงเครือแดงผูกไว้ บัดดีโตเจ้าเฮือนไหทาน บัดดีซาขอคอกขอคอง
 หาดทรายหดวงของปูเปเนเจ้า ผู้เจานาแมนอาดญาหดวง หาดทรายหดวง
 ของเพนนแดว.

Which in English means:—

“Little one, please come up. Thou of lucky omen, please come up. Present thy tail before thy head. Now I let down the creeper noose. Now, thou art caught. I tie thee with the creeper rope to the stake. Now, I have a fish. The Possessor of Plenty has made me a gift. Now, again I ask for abundant gifts from thee, O, great Sandbank, Chief of all, Lord of the Water, great in power, from thee, O, Great Sandbank, owner of the Golden Basin.”

This prayer or incantation is repeated until the fish floats to the surface in the net. While all this is taking place should the fisherman's hat fall from his head, or his clothes drop from his body, he should not pick them up, for if he did, the fish will escape from the net.

When the fish comes to the surface of the water, the boatmen assist each other in securing it. This is known as scooping the tail of the fish (ตักหางปลา). This is done by placing a creeper noose over the tail, tightening it and then threading the rope through the gills, and securing the fish to the side of the boat. The fishermen begin to dance with joy, and in their excitement shout out volleys of abuse, and when they have calmed down, paddle the boat slowly toward the river bank, where the fish is tied to a stake, fixed in the water in front of their hut.

10. The people of the right bank live in temporary huts on that bank, and those of the left bank do the same on their bank. They do not mix. Should any boat having caught a fish, lose it, owing to the fish breaking away, the fishermen have to perform the whole ceremony of propitiation afresh, and they are subjected to the abuse and jeers of their more successful fellow fishermen.

11. Early in the morning of the 13th waxing of the moon the ceremony of making offerings to the Spirit who owns the Golden Basin at the shrine on the sand bank, has to be performed. This oblation consists of nine tables of sweetmeats, each table having nine dishes. Seven of these are presented to the Spirit of the Basin. One to the Spirit Guardian of the Gate, and one to the Spirit of the Gong. The offerings for the Spirit Guardian of the Gate is made at a hut, specially erected on the sand bank, in front of the boat landing. When these offerings have been made, a fish, the first to be caught, known as the Cham fish (ปลาจำ) is killed, and its head and tail are presented to the Spirit of the Golden Basin. The fish is prepared as food, some being spiced (ลาบ) some being made into salad, some toasted, some curried, some fried, some made into a plain curry, and the liver toasted. One of each of these dishes is placed on a table with a bottle of spirits, and nine tables are so prepared. Seven are presented to the Spirit of the Basin, one to the Guardian of the Gate, and one to the Spirit of the Gong. About midday the second fish is caught, killed, and its flesh, with spirits, is presented to the Spirit of the Basin, some being offered to the Guardian of the Gate and the Spirit of the Gong. This presentation is made with the same ceremony as in the morning. Music is played while the ceremony is being carried out, flutes and reed pipes being used.

Early on the morning of the 14th waxing of the moon, the Master of Ceremonies commands the Cham, Owner of the Spirit, to kill another fish and make offerings of the flesh to the Spirit Guardian of the caverns, situated on the rocky cliff on the right bank of the river, because the subaquatic caverns in which the fish live are near this spot. The same ceremonial is observed as when making offerings to the Spirit of the Basin at the Pam Sai shrine on the sand bank, and when propitiating the Spirit Guardian of the Frontier.

12. From the moment the nets are dropped in the water, and trawled or dragged to catch the fish, the whole concourse of people present, men, women and children, both fishermen and those who have come to look on, engage in a great tournament of abuse, but offence is not taken because the ceremony has demanded this observance from ancient times. This tournament of abuse continues till fishing is over. Abuse as follows is shouted out:—

พ่อเดียว แม่เดียว เดี่ยว บกเดียว บกหมา บกหัวदान บกหมา บก

หมาดีแม่มัง กัดแม่มัง บกเดี่ยวกูขอดีเมียมึงแต่ กูขอดีลูกสาวมึงนำ บก
 เฒ่าหัวถ่าน มึงเฒ่าดีตายแล้ว กะยังมานำเขา หมาดีแม่มัง มึงมาน กู
 จะไปนอนนำเมียมึง มึงอย่าดีมา มึงคนเมือดำ.

“O, my friends, men and women. Friends, O, friends, O, dogs O, bald headed fools, O, ancients in thy dotage. A dog shall lay with thy mother. I will lay with thy mother. O, Friend, let me lay with thy wife. O, friend, let me lay with thy daughter. O, ancient, bald headed one, thy age is great. Death is near to thee, yet thou comest with the throng. A dog shall lay with thy mother. As thou art here, I will go and in thy place, lay with thy wife. Do not return home till dawn.”

From very ancient time, to the present day, the Spirit which enter the medium has always been a Kha (ข้า) Spirit, and as a Spirit of this nationality, is somewhat lascivious and delights in abuse and taunts in which the sexual relationship takes a prominent place, abuse of this nature has been handed down from father to son, and from mother to daughter, from time immemorial. The people believe that the form of abuse as given above is as music in the ears of the Spirit, gives pleasure to him and they thus gain his favour. The people also hold that if they did not abuse each other in the coarsest language the fish would not enter their nets.

13. When the left bank of the river Me Khong was Siamese territory, no fee, duty or royalty was levied in cash on the catch, as the price of the fish tail (ค่าหางปลา), but a payment in kind was made on the following scale. If one or two fish only were caught there was no payment, but if three, then one fish was given, and if six, two were given. One fish was reserved for feeding the Spirit. Since the left bank has become French territory, a royalty of ten piastres is levied in cash for each fish caught, which is called the price of the fish tail. The first fish caught is bought by the Lord of the Waters (เจ้าน้ำ), and used for feeding the Spirits. The price paid is 30 piastres irrespective of whether the fish is big or small, the owner thus only receives 20 piastres. Should the people of the right bank catch a fish and keep it on their bank, which is Siamese territory, they still have to pay 10 piastres to the Lao Chief of Vieng Chandr to cover the expenses incurred in connection with the fishing ceremonies. This price of the fish tail is not paid to the State. The ceremonies depicted in this paper are performed on the left bank of the river.

14. The maximum catch in the Golden Basin in a season does not exceed one hundred fish, and the minimum is about thirty. The weight of an average sized fish is about 270 lbs. and the eggs weigh about 6½ lbs. Whole fish are sold at prices ranging from 40 to 80 piastres. When the royalty on a fish has been paid, the owner is at liberty to take it to his home. It is here killed, and the retail price of the flesh is about Tc. 1 for 1½ lbs, and of the eggs Tc. 1 for 150 grammes. The people consider the flesh and eggs to be a great delicacy.

As many as 1,000 seine boats engage in the pursuit of catching this fish annually. Traders and others are responsible for another 200 boats. The number of persons gathered at one of these festivals is about 7,000.

The French authorities permit the people to indulge in every form of gamblings free. Opium addicts are allowed to smoke opium without molestation. Booths for the sale of food, drink, and other things are scattered along the river bank. The people are showing signs of losing their belief in the necessity for the observance of these rites, and as it is probable that this ceremonial festival will disappear in a few years, I have thought it wise to make a permanent record of it, with the incantations, before decadence has set in, and the festival disappeared.

F. H. GILES.

APPENDIX

Doctor H. McCormick Smith's Letter.

Department of Fisheries,
Bangkok.
October 27, 1933.

Dear Mr. Giles,

The Pla Bük of Mekhong is a catfish belonging in the genus *Pangasius* which has numerous species (about 12) in Siam, Malaya, Dutch East Indies, Indochina and India. The fish has unfortunately been referred to in some of the local literature as a sturgeon, and this misstatement is constantly recurring, as are other inaccuracies and absurdities (as, for instance, that the Pla Bük nourishes its young with milk). So far as is known, this fish is peculiar to the basin of the Mekhong, but its relatives are found in many other streams, and among those common and well-known in Siam are the *Pla Tepo*, *Pla Sawai*, *Pla Saiyu*, *Pla Sangkawad*, and *Pla Thepa*.

The specific identity of the Pla Bük has not been satisfactorily determined for the reason that no ichthyologist has studied the young and half-grown individuals or has ever seen a specimen less than one and a half metres long. My own opinion is that the Pla Bük may prove to be an overgrown stage of a species which when smaller is recognized under another name, but speculation on this point is not very profitable and settlement of the question must be deferred until studies can be made at the spawning grounds at Luang Prabang or until young specimens are available for examination. A very interesting feature of the fish is the complete absence of teeth and, in consequence, the fish has become a vegetarian, subsisting entirely on algae or other aquatic plants. This absence of teeth has been assumed to be of taxonomic importance by M. Chevey, of Indochina, who has recently bestowed on the fish a new generic and specific name, *Pangasianodon gigas*; but I have found that in *Pla Sawai* the teeth completely disappear by the time the fish reaches a length of 70 or 75 cm.

This Pla Bük is found throughout the Mekhong at least as high up as Chiengsen. At the end of the rainy season, when the floods have subsided, the fish undertakes a definite upstream migration

which carries it to Luang Prabang by the latter part of February. Spawning is said to take place in Lake Tali, and the fish remain in the vicinity of Luang Prabang and are caught there as late as June when, apparently, the downstream migration of adults and young occurs.

The Laos at Luang Prabang have some peculiar notions about the Pla Buk but apparently possess little information. One of their curious beliefs is that only the female fish migrate up the river and that the male fish, with yellow scales, await the arrival of the females at Lake Tali, which water the males never leave. On the other hand, the fishermen at Vientien and Nongkai report the presence of males in the annual upstream migration; and I have no doubt that both sexes are represented throughout the fish's range.

I have been to the annual fishery above Nongkai, and I have there measured and photographed a fish that was 2.47 m. long. There are authentic records of fish 3.00 m. long, and length of even 3.5 m. has been reported.

Sincerely yours,

H. M. SMITH.

