

Pu Khwan Khao Worship of Shan in Yunnan: Fertility and Buddhist Felicity¹

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Abstract

This paper is a study of *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*, a chant used in the worship ceremony to the god of rice *Pu Khwan Khao* of Shan in Yunnan. Akin to other groups of Tai peoples, the ceremony is performed after the harvest to express gratitude to *Pu Khwan Khao*. Also, it relates to Tai Yai myth of rice in which *Pu Khwan Khao* claimed that his merit was comparable to the Buddha since nobody could be alive without him, including the Buddha who could attain awakening after consuming rice. The Buddha accepted this claim and told people not forget to worship *Pu Khwan Khao*. The myth, therefore, shows the fight and the ‘attempt’ to compromise between Tai ancient belief and Buddhism. However, the compromise and combination between two beliefs are apparently expressed in *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*. People feel thankful to *Pu Khwan Khao* since he contributes rice to them, not only to consume but also to give alms, one of the most significant practices to attain Nirvana according to Buddhist belief. In addition, the aspiration of people when they present the offerings to *Pu Khwan Khao* is to be reborn in the time of *Maitreya*, the next Buddha in this Auspicious Aeon, and to attain Nirvana after listening to his sermon. This ‘traditional’ aspiration demonstrates that the ancient ritual of *Pu Khwan Khao* worship is eventually not different from Buddhist sacrifice, a kind of gift giving. These may bring to the conclusion that the aim of *Pu Khwan Khao* worship of Shan in Yunnan is not only fertility but also the Buddhist ultimate felicity.

I. Introduction

Every group of Tai peoples shares the indigenous belief of *Khwan Khao*, the soul of rice, who contributes food and fertility to human beings. *Khwan Khao* is therefore highly respected among Tai peoples.

However, from the studies of Prakong Nimmanheminda (1998), Siraporn Nathalang (2004), and Poramin Jaruworn (2005), they argue that when Buddhism was brought into the regions, it ‘fought’ with Tai indigenous belief. Tai ancestors faced a dilemma—to continue to hold their indigenous belief or to adopt Buddhism. This is apparently reflected in the rice myths telling the story of the conflict and compromise between *Khwan Khao*, the representative of Tai indigenous belief, and the Buddha, the representative of Buddhism.

Eventually, after the conflict and attempt to compromise, in most groups of Tai people the indigenous belief and Buddhism were integrated. There are many kinds of integration, such as the sermon of ‘*Dharma Ya Khwan Khao*’ of Thai Lue in Sipsongpanna telling the conflict between the soul of rice and the Buddha, but it is regarded as a Buddhist scripture and demonstrated by a monk to ask for rain; or the Lao myth of rice telling that the size of rice was gradually smaller and smaller over the times of each previous Buddhas in this Auspicious Aeon.

¹ I would like to show my gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suchitra Chongstitvatana, my advisor who inspired me to study this topic, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Siraporn Nathalang and Assoc. Prof. Sukanya Sujachaya, for their kind suggestions, and the Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D. Program, the Thailand Research Fund for the support.

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Likewise, the integration between Tai indigenous belief of *Khwan Khao* and Buddhism is also expressed in *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*, a chant used in *Khwan Khao* worship ceremony of Shan, Dehong Tai in Dehong Prefecture, western Yunnan.

II. Tai Rice Myth and Ritual: the Importance of *Khwan Khao*

Various versions of rice myths have been told in order to stress the importance and merit of *Khwan Khao*, so that people would respect and take a good care of rice. According to the study of Poramin Jaruworn (2005: 18-19), the stories about the soul of rice can be classified into three myth-types. Firstly, rice was beat by a widow and sold by a greedy merchant. The story tells that in the ancient time, rice was as big as a melon. And she would fly to the barn herself. But one day, a widow beat rice. This made rice angry and flew away. The world was hence under starvation. People had to implore her to come back. She accepted but for this time she reduced herself to a very small size. People had to plant and cook rice before eating. Also, they had to worship and took a good care of rice too.

Another version of this first type of rice myth changes the motif of beating to selling. Since a greedy merchant stored a large amount of rice in his barn and then sold it. This, likewise, made rice angry and flew away.

The second rice myth-type, the grandmother or grandfather rice challenges the Buddha's merit which shows the conflict and compromise between the two beliefs. The detail of the story will be told later.

And for the third myth-type, the mother rice was previously a celestial maiden. She sacrificed her life as food for human beings with the help of the red-eyed sage. In many versions, it is stated in the myth that the mother rice *Nang Khosok* fulfilled the perfection of generosity through her self-sacrifice.

The respect towards *Khwan Khao* reflected in the myths is substantiated in the ritual called '*Tham Khwan Khao*', or rice consoling ceremony, which is generally performed when rice grows, after the harvest, and before it is stored in the barn.



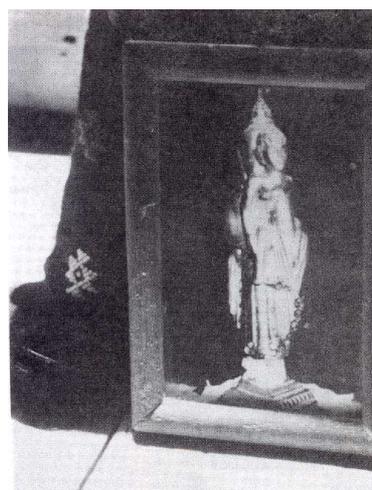
Tham Khwan Khao ceremony, Central Thailand

III. Conflict and Compromise between the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* in Shan Rice Myth



ภาพวาดแม่โพสพ
(ฝีมือชาวดอย อี๊ดอ่าไท
ในหนังสือของโรงเรียนวัดเกาะ พ.ศ. 2475)

Mae Phosop



Pu Khwan Khao

The soul of rice in most groups of Tai peoples is a goddess and she is called by several names, for example, *Mae Khao*, *Mae Phosop*, *Nang Khosok*, *Mae Khwan Khao*, and *Ya Khwan Khao*. But for Shan or Dehong Tai in Yunnan, southern China, the soul of rice is a male god, *Pu Khwan Khao* (the grandfather rice). Siraporn Nathalang (1995) claims that this uniqueness may be influenced by the patrilineality of Chinese culture.

The Shan rice myth, told by Phaka Man Saeng, collected by Siraporn Nathalang (1998), tells that one day the Buddha commanded a gathering of his disciples. *Pu Khwan Khao* was also in that place but the Buddha did not recognize him. This upset *Pu Khwan Khao*, so he walked out. The Buddha then asked one of his disciples who was that man. He replied that it was *Pu Khwan Khao*. Having heard that, the Buddha felt so sorry, he followed *Pu Khwan Khao* and tried to call him back. But *Pu Khwan Khao* did not stop running until he reached the Dark Land. When the Buddha arrived there, he illuminated his radiant, so he could see *Pu Khwan Khao*. The Buddha caught *Pu Khwan Khao*'s hand and carried him back to the temple. Then the Buddha asked *Pu Khwan Khao*,

The Buddha: "What makes you so dissatisfied?"

Then *Pu Khwan Khao* blamed the Buddha for not paying attention to him or honoured him in the gathering. He also claimed that his merit was comparable to the Buddha since nobody could be alive without him, including the Buddha who could attain Awakening and find the middle path only after consuming rice. (*Phaka Mansang, Jia Yanjong 1994: 115*)

Pu Khwan Khao: "Before you attained Nirvana, I had done a great merit. People have food to eat because of me. During six years and six months of your self-torture, I was hiding in the water, dissolving the rice in it for you. You drank it so you could survive. What you drank at that time was the rice-water."

Then the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* challenged their merit to each other. But the merit or perfection of the Buddha was greater than of *Pu Khwan Khao*.

The Buddha: "I fulfilled the perfection in my 550 previous lives so that I could attain Awakening."

Pu Khwan Khao: “My soul is my merit. All crops in this world are alive since they have my soul. If there is no rice, then the Buddha cannot survive.”

It seems that the word of *Pu Khwan Khao* is reminding us to the biography of the Buddha, the relations between eating, food, rice, the middle path and Awakening are woven. We might think of *the Madhupayasa*, or the honeyed-rice offered to the Bodhisatta by Sujata, which was the first meal after the extreme self-torture of fasting. It is apparent that after consuming this honeyed-rice, the Buddha’s body was recovered. Then he sat down for the contemplation, he found the middle path and attained Awakening at the end of the Vesakh night.

However, I will not approach a Buddhological problem if the Buddha really needs to eat which is very controversial and is interpreted differently in many Buddhist schools. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha, like other human beings, needs to eat just to maintain his physical body.



Sujata offering the Madhupayasa

(Picture by Chakrabhand Posayakrit, Thai National Artist)

In the **Mahaparinibbana Sutta**, the Buddha praises the alms which cause the greatest result since the Buddha attains Nirvana after consuming them. As we know that there are two kinds of Nirvana: *Sa-upadisesa Nibbana*, or Nirvana when you are still alive, and *Anupadisesa Nibbana*, Nirvana after the death, so in the life of the Buddha, there are two alms that cause the greatest result; the first is of Sujata who offered the honeyed-rice before the Awakening, and the second is of Cunda who offered the *Sukaramaddva* before his death.

Now it is more apparent from the life of the Buddha that food and rice are related to the middle path and the Buddha’s Awakening.

As a result, undoubtedly, the Buddha must accept the claim of *Pu Khwan Khao*. He proved it true by telling people not forget to worship *Pu Khwan Khao* as they did unto him.

The Buddha: “I would not forget your merit.”

Pu Khwan Khao: “Your merit is greater than mine.”

Therefore, the conversation between the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* in this myth shows the fight and the ‘attempt’ to compromise between Tai ancient belief and Buddhism.

According to Siraporn Nathalang (2007) this plotline is also appeared in the myths of other groups of Tai peoples, such as Tai Ahoms in India. But this time, the conflict is not between rice and the Buddha, but rice and milk. Rice is the main food of Tai peoples so it represents Tai indigenous belief and Tai culture, while milk represents Indian or so-called Hindu culture. This shows that Tai Ahoms, once, had to choose between rice, which is their original culture, and milk, which is a new culture for them.

The conflict or fight between the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* sounds like the fight between the Buddha and *Baka Brahma* as appeared in *the Jayamangala Atthagatha*, one of the most famous chanting of Thai people.



The Buddha defeats *Baka Brahma*.

The story is that *Baka Brahma* has a wrong view that everything is created by Brahma. All things are always certain and last forever which is against the Buddha’s teaching of the law of impermanence. The Buddha challenges *Baka Brahma* to fight by letting him hide in the place he thinks that he will not be found. But every time *Baka Brahma* hides, the Buddha can find him. Then the Buddha takes his turn, he hides himself, but this time *Baka Brahma* cannot find him. *Baka Brahma* can only hear the voice of the Buddha. Eventually, *Baka Brahma* realizes that the Buddha is not going anywhere, but walking on his head. Therefore, it is stated in the chanting that by the supreme knowledge, the almighty Buddha defeats *Baka Brahma* and corrects his wrong view. This story of the fight between the Buddha and *Baka Brahma* is also found in many local texts, it is the legend of the sacred song *Sadhukarn* used at the beginning of a ceremony. Also, it is represented as a gesture of Buddha image too.

If we compare the story of *Baka Brahma* to the myth of *Pu Khwan Khao*, we will find some similar motifs:

- I. The challenge of *Baka Brahma/ Pu Khwan Khao* against the Buddha
- II. The fight between the Buddha and *Baka Brahma/ Pu Khwan Khao*
- III. The hiding of *Baka Brahma/ Pu Khwan Khao* and the finding of the Buddha

But what is totally different is the result of the fight. In the story of *Baka Brahma*, we can strongly say that the Buddha defeats *Baka Brahma*, since *Baka Brahma* corrects his wrong view and then becomes a Buddhist, whereas in the myth of *Pu Khwan Khao*, the Buddha ‘recognizes’ the merit of *Pu Khwan Khao* and tells people to give respect to *Pu Khwan Khao* as they do unto him.

Why is *Pu Khwan Khao* so important that ‘the Buddha’ had to tell people to give respect?

This question might be answered by another myth of *Pu Khwan Khao* which can be classified into the first rice myth-type. The myth tells that originally rice was as big as a papaya. But one day while rice was flying into a house, a lazy woman beat rice. This, indeed, made *Pu Khwan Khao* so angry. Hence, he became an annual crop, no wings, and reduced from a very big size to a small grain. (Dao Paoyao quoted in Suchit Wongthet 2003: 13)

If we, as people who go to a supermarket and buy rice to eat, imagine the difficulties of planting rice which our ancestors had to confront, and consider this myth again, then we would understand the message hidden in the myth and would be able to answer the question clearly as Gogoi (1998: 159) explains the importance of *Khwan Khao* reflected in the belief and rituals of Tai Ahoms which can be paralleled to our case:

“It [Rice] is a giver of life and is important crop from the moment of birth until death in the life of Tai Ahoms. It is their chief sustenance and an essential part of their relationship with the spirits and ancestors. Ahoms as well as other minor Tai groups of Assam believe that rice has a soul, *khwan khau*, and it has its own spirits and goddesses, who are the sole cause of good and bad harvest. If its spirits and goddesses are dishonoured and dissatisfied, they would go away and there would be no good crop and a family would have to face hardship due to unfortunate shortage of rice grain.”

In the myth of *Pu Khwan Khao* and the Buddha, the key words said by *Pu Khwan Khao* are ‘rice’, ‘food’, ‘life’, ‘alive’, or ‘survive’, while these words are rarely or cannot be found from the Buddha. This surely means something. Rice, food, life, survival is the basic need of human beings. The indigenous belief ensures people about these things but Buddhism does not do so. What we can hear from the Buddha is ‘perfection’ or ‘Awakening’ which, perhaps, seems to be the second in human’s life. Everybody needs to have food and survive first, and then Awakening follows. This may be the reason why people, and even the Buddha himself, still have to pay respect to *Pu Khwan Khao* as reflected in the myth.

In another version of the myth, the story is in a same vein. The Buddha asked *Pu Khwan Khao* amidst the gathering of the deities what made him so dissatisfied. But this time, *Pu Khwan Khao* did not blame the Buddha, he just asked the Buddha calmly,

Pu Khwan Khao: “I have heard that you are the Omniscient One, you know everything about this life, previous lives, and lives to come. Now, try to answer me, what is dwelling underneath the earth?”

The Buddha was shocked by this question. He replied that he has never thought about it before. So he admired the knowledge of *Pu Khwan Khao* and told people to worship *Pu Khwan Khao* like they do unto him.

IV. Integration of Tai Indigenous belief and Buddhism in *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*

However, after the conflict, fight, and attempt to compromise as reflected in the myth, from time to time, Buddhism and the indigenous belief have been compromised and, can be said, completely integrated. *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao* is another good example of this integration.

Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao is a text recited in the *Tham Khwan Khao* ceremony performed after the harvest to express gratitude to *Pu Khwan Khao*. The word ‘*lik*’ means text or book, ‘*lu*’ means ‘to offer, to worship’.³

This is the brief translation of *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao* from the Thai translation which is published in the book **Songs and Rituals of Tai Nua or Tai Yai in Yunnan** edited by Rani Lertluemsai (2001).

“*Okassa! Okassa!* Now my two hands are raised unto my head, the coiled hair is like a golden lotus, as I am coming to worship you, O, the gracious *Pu Khwan Khao*.”

“Thou art the one who creates all kinds of rice. At all times, no matter whether it is morning, daytime, or evening, I would come to kneel down and express my gratitude unto thee. Thy merit is beyond the Mount *Meru*, fills all directions of space.”

“As we have food to consume and to give alms because of thy merit, days and nights we would give alms; days and nights, we would offer many kinds of food unto you. May the merit of these offerings bring us to the upper realms. I wake up early in the morning to give white rice and other things as alms. May *Sakka*, chief of gods, well recognize my merit and record my name.”

“My scented rice is called *Imam Puppam Pindhapatam Bhojanam Mogadaya*.”

“Whenever I am reborn as a deity, or as a human being, may I abide in moral and faith. May all deities, all spirits recognize my gift-giving.”

“Now I perfectly arrange all things to present unto thee, *Pu Khwan Khao*. May thou bless me with the well-being. May I be far away from all kinds of danger and sickness. May *Sakka*, chief of gods, and other deities dwelling in all directions come swiftly in the right time to save me from danger and all sufferings. May I see *Maitreya*, the Buddha in the future.”

“When the Buddha *Maitreya* compassionately comes to this *Jambu-dvipa* to give sermons for all sentient beings, may all merit I have done become a divine vehicle, bringing me to the upper realm of Nibbana, not be back to the rebirth again. O merit, merit. *Sadhu! Sadhu!*”

From the text, we may see that people feel thankful to *Pu Khwan Khao* since he contributes rice to them, not only to consume but also to give alms, which is one of the most significant practices on the path to Nirvana. In addition, the aspiration of people when they present offerings to *Pu Khwan Khao* is to be reborn in the time of *Maitreya*, the next Buddha in this Auspicious Aeon, and to attain Nirvana after listening to his sermon. This ‘conventional’ aspiration proclaimed after giving the offering to *Pu Khwan Khao*, a god in the indigenous

³ I am grateful Ven. Dr. Dhammasami as he kindly translated this word for me.

belief, demonstrates that the ancient ritual of *Pu Khwan Khao* worship is eventually not different from a Buddhist sacrifice. These may bring to the conclusion that the aim of *Pu Khwan Khao* worship of Shan in Yunnan is not only fertility but also the Buddhist ultimate felicity, Nirvana.

If we examine other texts of the *Tham Khwan Khao* ceremony, or the texts recited when an offering is presented to the soul of rice, I think we might rarely find the aspiration to be reborn in the time of *Maitreya*, or the aspiration to attain Nirvana. People just ask for fertility or good product of rice.

Therefore, the integration between Buddhism and the indigenous belief as reflected in ***Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*** is that people now take the Buddhist ultimate felicity of Nirvana as their utmost aim. *Pu Khwan Khao* is the one who gives people an opportunity to be a good Buddhist—to give alms—one of the most important practices to attain Nirvana. And the integration is totally complete when the worships given to the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* are equivalent as we can see from the text that when people worship *Pu Khwan Khao*, they aspire to be reborn in the time of *Maitreya* and, finally, to attain Nirvana.

The equivalence of the Buddha or so-called in Shan “*Chao Phara*” and *Pu Khwan Khao* is also shown in the tradition of daily worship. The text collected and translated into Thai by Siraporn Nathalang (1995) says:

“*Iktapat*, I offer these rice and food to the Buddha and *Pu Khwan Khao* with respect. In this morning I pay homage unto you as it is our old tradition. May you bless me with wealth. I offer this food to the Buddha. I offer this rice to *Pu Khwan Khao*. *Sadhu! Sadhu!*”

It is actually very common to see the conflict, the fight, the compromise, and eventually, the integration between two religions or two systems of belief. In the case of Tai indigenous belief and Buddhism, there are many kinds of integration. This study is just another example. In my opinion, the integration as reflected in ***Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*** manifests that human beings always seek for a feeling of ‘security’ from what they believe; both the security for this present life and for the unseen future. People worship *Pu Khwan Khao* to ensure the fertility or survival which is the security of the present life. At the same time, as they are now influenced by the Buddhist belief, so they aspire for the Buddhist felicities, the rebirth in the time of the next Buddha, and Nirvana to ensure the security in the lives to come though they are worshipping the god in the indigenous belief.

V. Conclusion

From the myth reflecting the conflict and compromise between *Pu Khwan Khao* and the Buddha, we might think that the Buddha or Buddhism is the victor since *Pu Khwan Khao* eventually admired the great perfection of the Buddha, and the Buddha was the one who brought *Pu Khwan Khao* back to the world and told people to worship *Pu Khwan Khao*. But I think it may sound unlikely to say that Buddhism or the Buddha ‘overcome’ the indigenous belief and can completely solve all problems. In the other word, I may say that Buddhism still cannot provide human a feeling of security for the present life. The indigenous belief still plays this role; otherwise people may give up worshipping *Pu Khwan Khao* and worship only the Buddha. It is clear from the evidence that people still worship *Pu Khwan Khao* who ensures the security for this present life, but they ‘buddhisticize’ the worship, or make it

equivalent to the Buddhist worship, to ensure the security of the lives to come according to the Buddhist belief. And this is what so-called ‘syncretism’.

To conclude, between Buddhism and the indigenous belief, nobody overcomes. For *Lik Lu Pu Khwan Khao*, people do not regard one belief superior to the other; they just find their way to combine two beliefs appropriately in order to serve what they need in a particular situation. Therefore, the real victor is, actually, the ‘human mind’ which always seeks for the feeling of security.

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