

THE ROLES OF THE BUDDHA IN THAI MYTHS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ATTEMPT TO INTEGRATE BUDDHISM INTO THAI LOCAL BELIEFS¹

Poramin Jaruworn²

Abstract

This article aims at identifying the roles of the Buddha in Thai myths in order to explain how the Thai were able to integrate Buddhism into their indigenous beliefs. Certain myths played an important role in recording the conflicts in the minds of Thai ancestors as to whether they should continue to hold to indigenous beliefs or whether they should adopt Buddhism. The roles played by the Buddha in certain myths reflect the fact that the Buddha took over roles that were once performed by local gods. Such roles were the provision of fertility, light and water. Attitudes of the Thai embedded in the myths offer insight into the mechanism through which Buddhism was able to be integrated into the indigenous belief system.

¹ This article is a part of a Ph.D. thesis entitled *Conflict and Compromise in Thai Myths* which was financially supported in part by a Chulalongkorn University Graduate Scholarship Commemorating the 72nd Birth Anniversary of H.M. King Rama IX and by The Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D. Program Scholarship, The Thailand Research Fund.

² Lecturer, Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Introduction

Animism had been practiced in Thai society long before Thai people adopted Buddhism. Traditional accounts relate that Buddhism was introduced to Thailand after the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputa (modern Patna) in the 3rd century BE. Moggalliputta Tissa had sent out two Buddhist missionary monks, the Elder Sona and the Elder Uttara to the Suvarnabhumi region. After that initial introduction, evidence shown in inscriptions and myths that Buddhism was received from Ceylon at various points in time.³ One may ask why Thai people were so receptive to Buddhism, which was a new religion, and why Buddhism came to play an important role in the Thai people's lives, replacing the indigenous religious beliefs.

Myths are a form of narratives that existed before written records. In Thailand, both oral myths and written historical myths can be found. The historical myths are usually composed of two parts: a mythical part which relates supernatural events, followed by a historical part which tends to be chronologically dated.

In this article, the role of the character of the Buddha in various myths is analyzed to explain how the Thai accepted and integrated Buddhism into their religious system.

The Buddha in Thai Myths

Thai myths are of various in kinds. There are myths that explain nature or natural phenomenon, such as creation myths, rice myths, solar and lunar eclipse myths, and

³ See Visudh Busyakul (2002); Piyanat Bunnaag (1991).

rain myths. There are also myths that explain the origin of culture heroes, and myths of ancient places. Moreover, there are myths concerning the introducing of Buddhism to the Thai-Tai region, such as myths of the Buddha's relics, the Buddha's footprints, and the images of the Buddha. Lastly, there are myths that explain rituals. Given the wide range of myths transmitted by the Thai-Tai, it is of importance to study how the myths reflect the religious beliefs of Thai people. The author has found that the Buddha in Thai myths played a variety of interesting roles.

The Buddha as World Creator

Creation myths are stories about how the world, human beings and nature were created.

The content of Thai creation myths can be categorized into three broad groups, which are: Pu Sangasa–Ya Sangasi (Grandfather Sangasa (ปู่สังกะสา)–Grandmother Sangasi (ย่าสังกะสี)) myth type, the giant gourd myth type, and Devata (deities) and the fragrant soil myth type.

The Grandfather Sangasa–Grandmother Sangasi myth type focuses on the creation of the world and the first man and woman. The stories tell that Pu-Ya (Grandfather – Grandmother) created the world and/or human beings first, then they made 12 animal toys out of clay for their 12 children. The stories always end with the statement “Pu-Ya were ancestors of people today.”

The giant gourd myth type focuses on the time of the world after the deluge when Thaen (แทน-the sky god) brought a giant gourd down to the earth. Then he used a pointed iron rod that had been heated in fire

to make a hole in the giant gourd through which people of various ethnic groups could crawl out.

The gods and the fragrant soil myth type though does not tell stories about the creator but focuses on the origin of man. This type of myth relates that human beings descended from heaven. Devatas, deities, came down to earth where they ate the fragrant soil at the beginning of the new cosmic age. They then became earth-bound human beings. The male and female devatas copulated and had children together.⁴

The first and the second types of myths relate that Pu-Ya, who are local gods, created the world and human beings, or that Thaen, another local god, gave birth to a man by bringing a giant gourd, which contained humans inside, down from heaven to earth. We can see that these kinds of stories did not mention the role of the Buddha in creating the world and human beings.

There are, however, certain versions of such creation myths which mention the role of the Buddha in creating the world. In the Pu Sangasa–Ya Sangasi myth type, certain versions state that the Buddha explained to his disciples about the world and cosmology. The Thai Khoen (Chiang-tung, Myanmar) and the Thai Yuan (Northern Thai) myths mention that after Pu–Ya had created the world there would be Buddhas born and enlightened on the Indian sub-continent.

Moreover, two versions of Isan (North-eastern Thai) myths describe the role of the Buddha in different ways.

⁴ Siraporn Nathalang (2004b: 81-98).

The first version: *Pathamamula* (ปฐมมูล), a northeastern Thai version from Ban Nonglom Temple, Muang District, Mahasarakham Province states that:

The Buddha explained to the enlightened disciples that at first there were no moon and sun. Only air and wind existed. The wind blew to create water, and there was Ananda fish in the water. The giant fish rolled up the land and rock. There was Putthangkaiyasangasa* (ปู่ตั่งไคยะสังกะสา) to guard the land and there was Itthikaiyasangasi** (อิตถิไคยะสังกะสี) to guard the rock. Pu-Ya created plants and animals. They had five children. Itthikaiyasangasi died and was reincarnated as earth. Putthangkaiyasangasa died and was reincarnated as a bird. Both of them were reincarnated many times and then became enlightened as the Buddha.

The second northeastern Thai version: *Mulapathamapanna*, (มูลปฐมปิ่นนา) from Ban Nonglom Temple, Muang District, Mahasarakham Province states that:

The Buddha explained that previously the cosmos had nothing. There were no sun and no moon. The Buddha meditated and he perspired. He mixed dirt from his body with water and soil, and sculpted it into Pu Sangasa and Ya Sangkasi. Both of them ate ambrosia so they had no lust. But when they ate rice they had lust and then they copulated. They had eight children. They gave their children eight kinds of animals to play with.

* give Pali forms for Grandfather Sangasa.
** give Pali forms for Grandmother Sangasi.

The Buddha advised Pu-Ya to make merit. The Buddha mixed dirt from his body with water and soil and sculpted it into Mount Sumeru and Mount Sattaparibhanda.

The first version integrates Pu-Ya which represents the indigenous belief incorporating the Buddha by saying that Pu was reincarnated to be born as the Buddha. In the second version, it is claimed that Pu-Ya was created by the Buddha. These two versions may differ in detail, but they both imply that the Buddha was superior in status to the local gods. The Buddha was the world creator that had higher status than Pu-Ya, who were the world creators according to the old beliefs. This obviously shows the attitude of the storyteller who told these two versions, that Buddhism was superior than the indigenous religion.

These two versions of the Pu Sangasa-Ya Sangasi myth type were an inversion of the indigenous Pu-Ya type mentioned before. In the indigenous version, Pu-Ya created the world first, and only later was the Buddha born; in the Buddhist version, it was the Buddha who was born first and then created Pu-Ya. This changes the status of the Buddha to world creator, replacing Pu-Ya, the creator in the old beliefs.

The Buddha as Fertility God

Rice is the staple food of the Thai, and rain is the main factor in growing rice, and light affects the growth of all that lives. In Thai myths, there are stories telling that rice, rain and light came from supernatural beings that granted these things out of compassion for human beings. If human beings did wrong and did not worship the supernatural beings properly, they would be punished and would suffer from drought. The stories

like this appear in rice myths, rain myths and the solar and lunar eclipse myths.

The Fertility Role of the Buddha in Rice Myths

The indigenous god that gave fertility to rice is the rice goddess or Mae Phosop (แม่โพสพ-Mother Rice). Sometimes she is called Ya Khwan Khao (ย่าขวัญข้าว-Grandmother Rice) or Pu Khwan Khao (ปู่ขวัญข้าว-Grandfather Rice). The story about the rice goddess appears in myths that can be classified into three myth types, namely, the hitting and selling rice myth type, the conflict between the rice goddess and the Buddha myth type, and the relation between the rice goddess and the red-eyed seer myth type.

The stories of the *hitting and selling rice myth type* always start by mentioning the size of the rice grain. In the old days, the rice kernel was very big. Rice flew to rice barns by themselves. The owner of the rice barns was often a widow. Later, the widow beat the rice so the rice was angry and flew away. Hence, there was starvation. People had no rice to eat. They had to plead with Khwan Khao to come back. Later on, Khwan Khao ran away for a second time when someone sold rice, and there was a second famine. People had to beg her to come back again.

The stories belonging to the *conflict between the rice goddess and the Buddha myth type* always start with that the rice goddess present together with Buddhist monks. She did not pay respect to the Buddha. The Buddha then asked her reason for not paying respect. Khwan Khao then replied, "Rice is great boon to human beings and used to feed all the Buddhas." The goddess of rice, being upset, ran away.

There was a famine. The Buddha had to make a journey to ask the rice goddess to come back.⁵

The stories of *the relation between the rice goddess and the red-eyed seer myth type* relate that previously the rice goddess was a celestial being who sacrificed herself to be born as rice. She went to the red-eyed seer to ask about people's suffering on earth. But when the red-eyed seer opened his eyes, apocalyptic fire burnt her to ashes. The seer then recreated her. When he understood that she wanted to sacrifice herself to be human food, he beat the rice kernel all over the sky with his stick to make its size smaller and easier to eat and to plant. People then had to worship the goddess of rice.

Out of these three types of Thai rice myths, the stories of the conflict between the rice goddess and the Buddha myth type explicitly mention the Buddha. In this type of myth, the character of the Buddha is put in opposition to the rice goddess. The following is an example of a version belonging to this myth type.

Dharma Ya Khwan Khao, (ธรรมย่าขวัญข้าว) a Tai Lue story in Sipsongpanna version, summarized by Prakong Nimmanahae-minda⁶ states:

In Rajagaha city, human beings, deities, Indra and Brahma gathered to listen to the Dharma of the Buddha. There was a rice grain turning to be a woman standing among the people and deities. Then the people asked her the reason why standing among them but not paying respect to the Buddha. Ya Khwan

⁵ See Siraporn Nathalang (2004b: 99-113).

⁶ See Siraporn Nathalang (2002: 104-105).

Khao then replied that she was superior to the Buddha so she would not pay respect to him. Then, she ran away to stay in the dark world for fifteen years. The people then suffered from starvation. They could not find even one grain of rice. Indra, Brahma and the four main gods of direction then went to see the Buddha and told him that people suffered from starvation because Ya Khwan Khao ran away. The Buddha then had to ask her to come back. He grasped her arm and put her in his bag. Ya Khwan Khao said that if the previous Buddhas did not eat rice they would not be able to be enlightened. She sacrificed herself by turning to rice kernels. The Buddha then grew rice. People then had rice to eat. The Buddha taught people to worship the goddess and offered her flowers and candles. He also taught the people that in times of famine, they should chant the Dharma Ya Khwan Khao and worship Ya Khwan Khao.

This version of the rice myth suggests several interesting points.

Firstly, the Buddha was challenged by Ya Khwan Khao, who was a symbol of the indigenous religion, since Ya Khwan Khao did not pay respect to the Buddha. The message here is that the indigenous religion needed some kind of recognition and gratitude.

Secondly, when Ya Khwan Khao ran away because she was upset that people did not recognize what she had done for the Buddha and the people, the Buddha had to ask her to come back, and this implies the exercise of power of the local religion, such that Buddhism had to yield to that power.

Thirdly, that the Buddha gave people the rice grains he got from Ya Khwan Khao to grow and also taught them how to worship rice implies that Buddhism accepted the significance of the local religion.

Furthermore, this kind of story reflects that when there was starvation, the Buddha could solve the problem. The Buddha was the one who brought the goddess of rice back. It shows that Thai people believed that, though the Buddha was challenged by the indigenous power, he was the victor in the end. The rice goddess had to come back to serve as food of the Buddha and people again. Some versions stated that the rice goddess had to pay respect to the Buddha before coming back. Moreover, the myths say that the Buddha taught people that they had to respect rice. The Buddha's role in the myth is later used to explain why people should pay respect to rice and why people had to perform a ritual to worship the goddess of rice.

The Fertility Role of the Buddha in Solar and Lunar Eclipse Myths

There are four types of solar and lunar eclipse myths⁷: the frog eating the moon or the sun myth type; Rahu eating the moon or the sun myth type; the quarrels between siblings myth type; and the elder brother visiting the younger brother myth type.

The frog eating the moon or the sun myth type tells a story about a frog that flew into the sky and ate the suns and the moons. This was because there were twelve suns and twelve moons in the sky. The weather had become very hot because of too many suns and moons. The frog continued eating the suns and the moons until only one sun and one moon were left. People had to bang

⁷ See Pathom Hongsuwan (1999).

on bamboo to frighten the frog so that it would stop eating.

Rahu eating the moon or the sun myth type was inspired by a Hindu story about the churning of the ocean of milk. Rahu secretly drank a magic elixir. The Sun God and the Moon God saw his wrongdoing and told Vishnu. Vishnu then cut Rahu into two parts immediately. His upper part was made immortal by the potion, but the lower part was not. Rahu was very angry at the Sun God and the Moon God. Each time he met them in the sky, he tried to swallow them, but they were able to escape because he did not have a lower part.

The quarrels between siblings myth type tells the story of three brothers who had a fight over rice to be given as food to a Buddhist monk. Some versions state that the names of the two older brothers were “Sun” and “Moon” and the youngest one was “Rahu”. The two older brothers scooped the beautiful part of the rice to offer to the monk, leaving only the burnt rice at the bottom. The youngest brother then was angry and wanted to take revenge. Whenever he saw the Sun and the Moon he would shade them so that they could not be seen by people.

The elder brother visiting the younger brother myth type tell a story about two brothers named “Sun” and “Moon”. They loved each other very much. Even after they died they always visited each other. When they visited each other, their shadows appeared on each other, causing an eclipse.

One example of a version belonging to the quarrels between siblings myth type is *Kop Kin Duean* (กบกินเดือน) (a northern Thai version) in *Duay Panya Lae Khwam Rak* (ด้วยปัญญาและความรัก). It goes thus:

Once upon a time, there was a rich man with two daughters. Later the rich man and his wife passed away and left a fortune worth 880 million to their children. The deceased rich man’s children wanted to make merit for their parents but monks lived far away in a forest. They prepared things to give to the monks and loaded them into a cart. The two elder daughters told their younger brother not to forget anything. When they reach the forest it turned out that they forgot a ladle to scoop rice into the monks’ bowls. The elder sisters were so angry and scolded their brother in the presence of other people. The brother ran home angrily. The two elder sisters made a wish to reincarnate as the sun and the moon respectively. The youngest brother wished to be born as Rahu in his next life, thinking that just as his sisters had humiliated him today, he would humiliate them in the next life. So, in the next life Rahu searched for a chance to eat the sun and the moon. When Rahu did so, the sun went to the Buddha to ask for a spell to capture the moon. The moon also got a spell from the Buddha to free herself from Rahu too. Therefore, Rahu could not eat the sun and the moon because of the Buddha’s spells. He could only overshadow the sun and the moon.

The role of the Buddha in this version is as savior of the sun and the moon from Rahu. He saved not only the moon and the sun but the whole world, because if Rahu could eat the sun and the moon there would be no light. Therefore, the Buddha was the savior of the entire world. He helped to preserve light for human beings. The Buddha taught spells to the sun and the moon. Rahu could only make a shadow over them for a short eclipse but could not eat them.

There are other versions of how the Buddha saved the sun and the moon from Rahu. Some versions say that when Rahu ate the sun and the moon, the Buddha asked his enlightened disciples to chant to chase Rahu away. Another version tells that when Rahu overshadowed the sun and the moon, the sun and the moon went to ask for help from the Buddha. The Buddha then talked to Rahu to release the sun and the moon. Rahu was frightened and released the sun and the moon and ran away. Or some versions tell that when they were eaten, the sun and the moon thought of the compassion of the Buddha, the power of the Buddha then controlled Rahu's mind so he could not swallow the sun and the moon further. Rahu feared the Buddha and ran away, so that brought light back to the world.

Those stories reflect the belief that the Buddha can resolve the problem or find the solution for the solar and the lunar eclipses. This means that he can save the world by bringing back light which is important for the world. The Buddha then is the one who brings light back to the world when there is such natural phenomenon. This shows that he has the power to control nature and is equal to the power of the indigenous supernatural beings.

The Fertility Role of the Buddha in Rain Myths

According to the indigenous belief, the supernatural being that gave rain to humans was Thaen, who sent Naga to swim in a pool in Muang Faa (เมืองฟ้า-the sky) causing rain to fall on Muang Lum (เมืองลุ่ม-earth). The following are Thai rain myths which can be classified into 3 myth types: Rain coming from the blessing of god myth type, Rain coming from the conflict of gods myth type, and Rain coming from supernatural helper myth type.

Rain coming from the blessing of god myth type tells that the rain givers were gods, both the highest rank, such as Thaen in Thai-Lao belief or Langdon (แล้งค่อน), and other gods that looked after rain, such as Paccunna (ปักษุนนะ) or Varuna (วรุณ). This type of myths will not mention conflict or fighting to make rain fall to the earth. They are only stories about those gods who sent rain down at a proper time or ordered those who had the duty to do so.

Rain coming from the conflict of gods myth type is told by focusing on thunder and lightning before rain. They are stories about gods fighting with demons or fighting with each other which caused rain. Stories of this type do not emphasize that rain comes from the power of gods. The story of *Mekhala-Ramasura* (เมขลา-รามสูร), which is well known in Thailand, is categorized in this type. *Rain coming from supernatural helper myth type* tells about sorcerers such as a Bodhisattva in *Phraya Kankak* (พญาคันคาก-King toad), or *Maccha Jataka* (มัจฉชาติก) in Thai myth or the story of *Pho To* (พ่อโต) in rain myths of the Zhuang people in Gwangsi who rescued human beings from drought. It is always told that the sorcerer wins over or makes contact with those who respond by sending rain down to the earth. This is different from the Rain coming from the blessing of god myth type which emphasizes the duty of gods in sending rain to human beings without contact with supernatural helper.

Rain myths that mention the role of the Buddha are found in the Rain coming from supernatural helper myth type. The story flashes to when the Buddha was a Bodhisattva. An example of this kind of story is *Phraya Kankak*.

Here is a version of *Phraya Kankak* summarized from a translation by Phan Wong-uan⁸

Thaen lived in a palace in Yugandhara City. The city had a very wide river. Thaen looked after this river. The city was surrounded by Sattaparibhanda Mountains. There were seven of Sumeru Mountains. When Nagas came to swim rain would drop in the proper time. Then Thaen did not allow Nagas to swim in the river cause drought. Human beings, animal and plants died numerously. When Phraya Kankak knew, he tried to find the way of going up to Thaen's city by asking garuda, nagas and termites to build a path up to the city. Both Thaen and Phraya Kankak had magic. Phraya Kankak pronounced spell and there were many frogs and small frogs came out and frighten people in the city. Thaen then pronounce his spell and there were snake came out and ate those frogs. The fight was very fiercely. Finally they fight by riding on the elephant back. Thaen was defeated. Phraya Kankak ordered Thaen to send Naga to swim and rain dropped as usual.

This version of the rain myth reflects conflict between a supernatural being, Thaen, and a Bodhisattva in Buddhist belief represented by Phraya Kankak. This shows that there was once conflict between pre-Buddhist belief and Buddhism, muchlike rice myths in which Ya Khwan Khao was in conflict with the Buddha. The role of Bodhisattva here is to be the one who brings fertility back to the world. The Bodhisattva went up to fight with Thaen and was victorious over him and ordered

him to allow Naga to swim to create rain as the Naga used to do. So, this can imply that Buddhism is superior to the old beliefs, in the same way as in the world creator myths and rice myths already mentioned.

The Buddha as Culture Hero

Culture heroes are persons who have laid the cultural bases for a community, such as teaching people to use fire, to grow rice, to weave, to dance, to play music and teaching them certain beliefs or leading people to build a city. The stories of culture heroes usually cannot be historically dated. The lives of culture heroes were always extraordinary, filled with a lot of miracles. Their status was partly god partly human. Examples of Thai culture heroes are Khun Cheung (ขุนเจือง), Phrachao Phrom (พระเจ้าพรหม), Thao U-thong (ท้าวอุทอง), Phra Ruang (พระร่วง) etc.⁹ The roles of culture heroes are divided into two types: first, teaching certain cultural aspects to the community; and second, leading certain groups of people to settle down.

The Role of the Buddha in Teaching Culture

In Lao and Northeastern Thai myths, there are stories of *Pu Lang Cheong* (ปู่ปางเซ็ง) (*Lanchang Chronicle* (พงศาวดารล้านช้าง)) who taught the peoples who came out of the giant gourd how to weave, how to grow rice, and how to perform death ceremony. The Tai-Ahom in Assam, India have stories about *Tao Lep Ling* (เต่าเล็บลิง) and *Tao Wan* (เต่าวัน) (*Ahom Buranji* (อาหมบูรานจี)) who taught people how to grow rice in the rainy seasons and how to make their living. They are also stories of *Khun Luang Khun Lai* (ขุนหลวงขุนหลาย) (*Tai-Ahom Chronicle* (พงศาวดารไทอาหม))

⁸ See Pathom Hongsuwan (2002).

⁹ Sukanya Sujachaya (1999: 203).

who controlled irrigation and digging of canals. In *Tamnan Ruang Samuttaraja*, (ตำนานเรื่อง สมุดตราข) which is a myth of the culture hero of northern Thailand, *Mahasommatiraja* (มหาสมมุติราชา) who is the hero of the story, taught people how to grow rice, divided land to people to grow rice and explained the origin of law.¹⁰ These culture heroes were always sent down from heaven by a supernatural power to rule human beings. Accordingly, before Thai people adopted Buddhism, these roles belonged to supernatural beings.

When taking a closer look at the role of the Buddha in Thai myths, it can be seen in various myths that the Buddha also played the role of culture hero. For the role of teaching knowledge to the community, the Buddha had this role in world creation myths as mentioned above, that after creating Pu Sangaka–Ya Sangasi from dirt of his body mixed with water and soil he then taught them to make merit. In the rice myths, after the Buddha brought back Ya Khwan Khao or the rice goddess, the Buddha then gave rice grains to the Thai-Tai people to grow. He also taught them to pay respect to the rice.

Myths that explain the introduction of Buddhism to Thai-Tai lands, such as *Tamnan Phrachao Liap Lok* (ตำนานพระเจ้าเลี้ยงโลก) in northern Thailand or *Tamnan Phra That Phanom* (ตำนานพระธาตุพนม) in the northeast, mention the Buddha preaching in various areas. The preaching emphasizes dharma, especially observing precepts and being merciful. *Tamnan Phrachao Liap Lok* mentions the introduction of Buddhism by establishing a stupa and his footprints in north of South East Asia in Mon, Shan,

Lanna and Sipsongpanna areas. *Tamnan Phra That Phanom* also mentions that the Buddha came and established stupas and footprints in the Mekhong River area. The Buddha met and taught people of various groups, such as Lawa, Tamil, Mon, Burmese, Yuan, Lue and Karen. The myths always conclude that after meeting the Buddha, those people became Buddhists.

In meeting those people, the Buddha did not teach only dharma. *Tamnan Phrachao Liap Lok* states that the Buddha went to Muang Khang (เมืองขาง) and taught people there to make windmills for agricultural purposes. Stories like this demonstrate that Thai people perceived the Buddha as a culture hero.

The Role of the Buddha as City Builder

The stories of city building appear in each city legend. Some cities were built with the help of a supernatural power. Some cities were built by culture heroes or rulers of those cities.

Myths about cities built by supernatural beings always mention the origin and the ending of the cities involved by Naga which was a symbol of supernatural power. In *Tamnan Suwannakhomkham* (ตำนานสุวรรณโคมคำ), which is a myth of ancient places of northern Thailand, Phraya Srisattana (พญาศรีสัตตนาคราช), who is the naga king, helps build Muang Suwannakhomkham (เมืองสุวรรณโคมคำ). *Tamnan Singhanawat* (ตำนานสิงหนวัติ) which is another story of northern Thailand, tells that Phantunagaraja (พันธุนาคราช) helped Prince Sighanawat build Nagaphansinghanawattinagara (นาคพันธุสิงหนวัตินคร). There are also stories about Naga helping build Cambodia and Wiang Chanburi on the Mekong River.

¹⁰ See Prakong Nimmannaeminda (2000: 63-77).

Naga was not only the cities builder. If human beings did something wrong, he would destroy those cities too. When people killed and ate Naga, who was disguised in the form of a big white squirrel, or if they showed no respect by walking on Naga's head, Naga would destroy their cities, as seen in *Tamnan Nonghannoi Nonghanluang* (ตำนานหนองหานน้อย หนองหานหลวง) in northeastern Thailand. Therefore, Naga was believed to be both the creator and the destroyer. It can be interpreted that Naga was a symbol of old beliefs before the spread of Buddhism to the area.

Besides the stories of Naga helping to build cities, there are also stories about Rishi, hermits, helping to build cities. In Thai myths, the Rishi is a symbol of a leader in the migration to build new city. A Rishi could determine the site for a prosperous new city or predict future catastrophes. Rishi was not only a native who held to old beliefs but he was a native who was ordained as a monk in Buddhism. Later, after ordaining, he wanted to eat delicious food so he asked for permission from the Buddha to leave and became a Rishi. Therefore, a Rishi was a person who held to both old beliefs and to Buddhist teachings. That Naga and Rishi helped build the cities was one way to show that ancient cities in the Thai-Tai area were built with the help of supernatural beings.

In Thai myths, there is no story telling of the Buddha helping build any city directly. However, there are many stories telling that he came to the area and gave his hair relic, set his footprint on stones and gave prophecy about the building of the cities. Later, those cities were believed to be cities according to his prophecy. Travels of the Buddha created a new characteristic of cities, which was a city prophesied by the Buddha. *Tamnan Phrachao Liap Lok* and

Tamnan Phra That Phanom are collections of legends about cities that were visited by the Buddha. His prophecy encouraged people build these cities. The stupa and footprint being sacred places in the centre of the community. In this way, the Buddha can be considered as a culture hero who helped built cities.

Stories about cities that were built by culture heroes always include wars that lead people to build the cities. In *Phrachao Phrommaharaja* (พระเจ้าพรหมหาราช), a story about a culture hero in the north, Phrachao Phrommaharaja was a warrior who chased away Khom Dam (ขอมดำ), who had invaded Lanna. Later, Phrachao Phrommaharaja build Chairakan city. It was also believed that he was the ancestor of the kings of Ayudhya. *Tao Hung Khun Jueng* (ท้าวสูง ขุนเจือง) mastered the art of warfare. He was victorious over many cities and ruled Hirannagara NgernYang Chiang Saen (หิรัญนครเงินยางเชียงแสน). Stories about *Phra Chao U-Thong* are told in many versions. One version tells that Phra Chao U-Thong, who built Ayudhya, suppressed cities that were located south of Phetchaburi down to Nakhon Sri Thammarat. Finally, he had to set territory with Sridharmasokaraja (พระเจ้าศรีธรรมโศกราช), the great king of the south.

It can be seen that to build cities, culture heroes had to fight with other groups first. If we look at the roles of the Buddha in building cities, it shows that he too played the role of culture hero. The Buddha had to suppress native people who believed in old beliefs first. In the myths, these native people were always symbolized by Naga or Yaksa. In *Tamnam Phrachao Tonluang* (ตำนานพระเจ้าตนหลวง), Naga in submission to the Buddha paid respect to him after Naga had tried to forbid the Buddha drinking water in Naga's pool. In *Tamnan Wat Phratat Pupo*

(ตำนานวัดพระธาตุพนม), a straving Yaksa tried to eat the Buddha, as he had not eaten for seven days. The Buddha then overcame him by a miracle and taught him to observe the Buddhist precepts. *Tamnan Phrachao Liap Lok* tells that the Buddha suppressed Alavaka Yaksa (อาฬวกยักษ์) at Muang Alavi (เมืองอาฬวี). *Tamnan Phranon khonmuang* (ตำนานพระนอนขอนแก่น) tells that Kassapa Buddha in travelling found an area surrounded by mango trees. Yaksa did not allow him to rest under those trees. The Buddha then taught Yaksa and gave his hair to Yaksa. Yaksa then buried the hair together with his tooth that fell out at that time under the mango tree that he was using to bury his treasure. Later, in time of Gotama Buddha, the Buddha stayed there at night. He asked Ananda to lay a cloth on the dead wood of the mango tree. Yaksa was very angry and attacked the Buddha. The Buddha fought with him and continued to instruct him until he was eventually converted to Buddhism.

These show that the Buddha possesses culture hero characteristics because he had to overcome native people and teach them Buddhism before cities he had predicted were founded.

Analysis and Conclusion

The overall analysis of Thai myths reveals that there were conflicts between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism at the time when people were trying to adopt Buddhism. It is possible that Thai people at that time doubted whether they should continue to believe in their old beliefs or change to believe in Buddhism.

When analyzing Thai myths, it is found that, in old beliefs, if people did wrong to supernatural beings, the supernatural beings would punish them. The degree of

punishment depended on the satisfaction of the supernatural power. Buddhism which was a newly introduced belief at that time was the solution to the problems between man and the supernatural power. This new religion solved conflict between man and supernatural powers and did not harm those who believed. When human beings suffered from draught or starvation, the Buddha helped rain to fall by fighting with Thaen. Moreover, there are stories about the Buddha bringing back the goddess of rice. These mythical languages show that the Buddha or Buddhism help provide fertility in agricultural societies. Hence, the Buddha performs the same role as local gods. He could solve problems occurring in the life of Thai people.

Previously, local gods played the role of creator of all life. Stories about solar and lunar eclipses also mentioned that the Buddha was the world creator. There are even some versions telling further that the Buddha, who established Buddhism was the one who actually created the originator of supernatural power, Pu Sangkasa-Ya Sangasi. Therefore, the Buddha was superior to the creator in the old beliefs. Moreover, when there was an eclipse, the Buddha could bring the world back to its normal state by stopping Rahu from eating the sun and the moon. Mythical language like this reflects that the Buddha has a higher status and powers equal to the local gods. The Buddha can be the creator and the savior in the same way as the local gods.

Moreover, as the leader of people and one who possesses characteristics of the culture hero, the Buddha also gives knowledge that conforms with an agricultural society. There are stories that the Buddha taught people how to grow rice, how to pay respect to rice, and how to make wind mills. Regarding the role of city builder, the

Buddha gave his relic and footprint to mark religious places. These stories show that the Buddha had a role, though indirectly, in city building. Thus, the culture that was created by the Buddha was an agricultural culture and the cities built were cities that had Buddhist sacred places as the heart of the cities.

One thing that shows that the Buddha was superior to the indigenous god is that he does not punish people as the indigenous gods did when angry at men. On the contrary, the Buddha helps people and provides them better lives. This explains why Thai people adopted and integrated Buddhism into their lives.

References

- Bunnaag, Piyanat. 1991. *Prawattisat Lae Arayatham Khong Srilangka Samai Boran Thung Samai Ananikhom Lae Khwam Samphan Thang Wattanatham Rawang Srilangka Kap Thai*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.
- Busyakul, Visudh. 2002. "The Buddhist Theravada Councils, and the Preservation of the Buddha's Teachings" *Manusya*. Special Issue No.4: 7-19.
- Hongsuwan, Pathom. 1999. Analysis of the Eclipse Myths of the Tai Peoples. Master's Thesis. Department of Thai, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University.
- Hongsuwan, Pathom. 2002 "Rain myth: Reflection of the Tai Relation Between Tai Peoples and Thai People from Folklore Theories" Paper present at the international Conference on Thai Studies, Nakhon Phanom.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1976. *Structural Anthropology, Vol.2*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1969. *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Nathalang, Siraporn. 2002. *Chon Chat Tai Nai Nithan (Tai Peoples in Folklore: An Analysis from Tai Folklore and Literature)*. Bangkok: Matichon.
- Nathalang, Siraporn. 2004a. "Conflict and Compromise between the Indigenous Beliefs and Buddhism as Reflected in Thai Rice Myths" *Thai Folklore: Insight into Thai Cultures*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press: 99-113.
- Nathalang, Siraporn. 2004b. "Tai Creation Myths: Reflections of Tai Relations and Tai Cultures" *Thai Folklore: Insight into Thai Cultures*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press: 81-98.
- Nimmannaeminda, Prakong. 2000. "The Genesis of Rulers: From Tai-Thai Myths to Traiphumpraraung" *Journal of Thai Language and Literature*. Vol.17: 63-77.
- Plange, V. 1976. *Duay Panya Lae Khwam Rak*. Bangkok: Siam Samakhom Lae Samakhom Sangkhommasat Hang Pratet Thai.
- Sujachaya, Sukanya. 1999. "Phra Ruang: Historic Hero and Culture hero" *Journal of Thai Language and Literature*. Vol.16: 202-216.