

**1992 TDRI Year-End Conference on**  
*Thailand's Economic Structure: Towards Balanced Development?*

**Tourism and Culture**  
**Bang-Fai Festival in Esarn**

**The 1992 Year-End Conference**

***THAILAND'S ECONOMIC STRUCTURE:  
TOWARDS BALANCED DEVELOPMENT?***

**Background Report**

**Tourism and Culture:  
Bang-Fai Festival**

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## Executive Summary

Culture is a set of rules and relationships that governs society. It is often expressed in the form of religion, rites, and rituals. Insofar as these forms are packaged as a commodity which is used to attract tourism, it can be said that tourism influences a society deeply because it can alter these rules and relationships. This can be detected in the expression of cultural values through rituals and festivals.

The Bun Bang-fai or Skyrocket Festival of the Northeast is a case in point. Thus far this festival has attracted minimal accusation that tourism has disrupted it. But this should not be cause for a lack of concern. Case research has found that this festival has undergone a long period of change and transformation. From a local custom at the village level, it was transformed into a regional affair involving provincial-level officials from the central government, and it has now been promoted as a major Northeast tourist attraction.

The paper advances two sets of arguments. First, the promotion of cultural events in this fashion can deprive culture from the local communities who have invented and nurtured these practices for generations. Second, culture will continually change as the society and the underlying beliefs of its people change. Tourism may be just one factor contributing to change. Tourism in itself neither harms nor helps to culture. It is how we deal with tourism which matters.

It is here that the case study provides concrete policy implications. On the one hand, if everything possible is done to modify culture, change it, and make it spectacular for tourists, then Thailand could damage its cultural heritage. Case research has found that educated officials in the towns are often more willing to do this than the local people are. Bangkok-trained officials often do not have a genuine appreciation for local cultures. This is dangerous, for it implies that Bangkok officials sent to the provinces may not be inhibited from packaging and selling local cultures in exchange for income from tourism.

On the other hand, the study suggests there are ways by which Thailand could make tourism beneficial to the preservation of local cultures. When cultural items are selected as tourist attractions, it makes the local population proud. Tourism could be used as an instrument for the preservation of that pride and the maintenance of Thailand's diverse cultural heritage. To do so we must not change our culture to suit the tastes and likings of tourists only. We must invite tourists to appreciate our culture and help preserve and admire it.

# **Tourism and Culture: Bang-Fai Festival in Esan**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

**T**ourism has often been blamed for causing undesirable changes in various cultural traits of Thai Society. In order to investigate the truth of such an accusation, this paper intends to find out factors, particularly those related to tourism, that influence the process and direction of change as well as actual alterations which have occurred in a select cultural trait.

Bun Bang-Fai, or the Skyrocket Festival of the Northeast, has been selected as the cluster of rites and ceremonies to be studied. The main reason for the selection is that, unlike other similar tourist attractions, minimal accusation of the undesirable impacts of tourism has been reported. This study, in fact, tries to avoid the obvious and well known festivals such as the Candle Procession at Buddhist Lent in Ubon Ratchathani, and other notorious tourist activities such as the Trekking Tours of the Northern Hills.

The term "culture" has many meanings. At least two of them are used in this paper. When we talk of the impacts of tourism upon a traditional ceremony, they involve the changes in the way the ceremony is performed. An example may be found in the replacement of the male dancers by female dancers in the Skyrocket Festival parades. Another meaning of culture is the way of life, the mechanism by which people of a society adapt to their environment. The impact of tourism upon culture in this sense can be seen in the case of the "trekking tour", because the ways of life of the hill-tribe population have been affected by activities of the tourists and the tour guides.

Culture in this latter sense covers patterns of interactions between individuals and groups in society. Its relationship to rites and rituals as expressed in festivals and ceremonies is complex in two ways. On the one hand, the function of rites and rituals is their contribution to the maintenance of the social system and their ways of life. On the other hand, changes in the ways of life and the social system would be reflected in changes in the performances and meanings of those rites and rituals in various ceremonies. This study intends to explain the complex relationship between changes in cultural practices, the rites and rituals in the ceremonies, and the factors inducing changes, notably tourism. It will explore how tourism generates changes in cultural practices. Attempts will be made to suggest ways by which tourism can contribute to the maintenance and preservation of culture.

Due to the complexity of the process of culture change, the varied patterns of interactions, and the number of other different factors that induce changes, the study of only one single cultural trait, the Skyrocket Festival in this case, would be inadequate in understanding the impact of tourism upon Thai culture in general. In fact, after this study of the Skyrocket Festival, the author becomes acutely aware of such deficiency. Other studies are needed to assess, for example, the impact of tourism on the development of a cottage industry, namely wood carving in Northern Thailand. Even with the addition of other dimensions of "cultural" practice, the findings from this study are still insufficient in making specific recommendations, with confidence, regarding tourism policy in light of its impact on culture. Therefore, this paper offers very general suggestions which will necessarily have to be modified and adapted to suit individual cases and particular activities.

## **2. APPROACHES FOR THE STUDY**

At first, the impacts and influences of tourism upon the Skyrocket Festival could possibly be distinguished from other factors by comparing the local performances of the festival in the past and at present (in the village) with the one catering for tourists in the town, Yasothon. However, the factors contributing to the changes as well as the actual process of change are so complex that it is impossible to distinguish different factors by simply comparing the festival in different places and at different times.

In our search for a solution, three approaches are used in the analysis of the festival.

1. This paper examines the relationship between the rites and ceremonies of the festival with the social structure, i.e. the relationship between various categories and groups of people



constituting the community or the society. In this, we shall be looking at the function of the festival at different periods of time and at different localities.

2. The conflicts, if any, that have been generated by changes introduced into the rites and ceremonies are investigated. The agents introducing changes are looked at, and their motives as well as beliefs are also analyzed. Attempts are made to find out how tourism relates to the changes and the conflicts.

3. Trends and directions of change in the performances of the festival as they have occurred in different places may be examined with regards to direct or indirect influences of tourism. It is expected that in some places, the influences of tourism are minimal, while in others, tourism has been used to justify changes in the performances.

First, this paper reviews the performances of the festival in the past as can be constructed from documents as well as verbal description by informants. Then we shall look at the changes that have occurred in three locations, namely, the town Yasothon, the village Ban Phue in Khon Kaen Province, and Nam Phong near Ubonrat Dam. Changes are explored by observing ceremonies in Yasothon and Ban Phue as well as by interviewing key informants. Unfortunately, time constraint prevents the study's inclusion of the shooting of skyrockets in Nam Phong.

### **3. BUN BANG-FAI AS IT WAS IN THE PAST:**

#### **THE PERFORMANCES OF THE FESTIVAL**

Bun Bang-Fai was a rain-making festival held at the beginning of the rainy season (May or June) in Siam (Thailand). The time was also the beginning of the planting season for rice, the main diet of the Thai people.

This festival was important, not only in assuring adequate rainfall, but also in connection with the health and general well-being of the villagers. It is said that the villagers felt that if the ceremony was not held, there would be drought and sickness.<sup>1</sup>

The festival was closely connected with the worship of *phi pu ta*, the village guardian spirit. Thus, when the village elders decided not to hold the ceremony, permission to

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Klausner. 1987. *Reflection on Thai Culture*, The Siam Society.

postpone it must be asked from the guardian spirit. And if the festival was held, the skyrocket was brought to the spirit shrine by male villagers, who danced around it.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhist monks and the *wat* (temple) were also much involved in the ceremony. The monks had the technical knowledge necessary for the making and shooting of the skyrockets, as well as the time to work on the extensive preparation. Thus the construction of the skyrockets took place in the *wat*, and the procession began by going around the temple hall three times.<sup>3</sup>

Often, the festival was linked with Buddhist ceremony, especially the ordination of village boys into monkhood and “*hod-song*” (paying respect to the monks), or celebration of the attainment of monastic rank by a local monk.<sup>4</sup> It was noted that in *Vientiane*, the festival was closely associated and identified with Buddhism. It was held on Visakha Bucha Day, and explanations of Buddhist origin of Bang-Fai are offered.<sup>5</sup>

Bun Bang-Fai involved inter-village activities. In an area at the *tambon* (sub-district) level, or *amphoe* (district) level, there would be a host village which initiated the festival and invited other nearby villagers to participate. To be the host, the village must have been able to organize the festival for three years in succession. Otherwise, it was believed, misfortune would befall the village.<sup>6</sup>

When a decision to host Bun Bang-Fai was made by the elders, a village meeting took place to make arrangements for the festival. Invitations would be issued to other villagers with which the host village had connections. The tasks of receiving and feasting these guests would be assigned to families in the host village, as well as funds and materials for the building of make-shift pavilions (*param*, *pham*, or *tupbun*) and the making of the skyrocket. Although to be the host village would incur large amounts of time and effort, the feasting of the guests

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.42-43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.43.

<sup>4</sup> This last was the main ceremony, the Bun Bang-Fai being only an appendage in the festival at Ban Phue. Khon Kaen in the year 1992

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.44. Visakha Bucha Day is the anniversary of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. “It is said that one of the grieving disciples of Buddha, unable to touch his torch to the towering funeral pyre of the Buddha, hurled his torch to the top of the pyre in the present day Bang-Fai Ceremony.”

<sup>6</sup> Interviews, Mr. Somchai Nilathi, Mahasarakham Teachers' College and a village elder in Khon Kaen Province.

would not impose a heavy burden on the host families as they were already committed to give feast on the occasion of the ordination of their sons.<sup>7</sup>

The villagers of the host village would build *pa-ram* along the road leading to the village *wat*. Each structure had 2 levels. The upper level had a wooden floor where monks would be feasted by the villagers. For the lower level, the ground was covered with leaves. This was where the young women gathered, overseen by an elder woman. These structures were erected for guests from other villages. The monks and young women would have come from the guest villages.<sup>8</sup>

Pho Bamphen Na Ubon, a ritual expert who led the Bang-Fai Procession in Yasothon, explained that in the past, the Bun Bang-Fai parade only consisted of men wearing and holding phallic symbols. With a great deal of drinking, these men paraded, dancing and playing with phallic symbols. They visited the *pa-ram* and courted and teased the young women there. The elder women would protect the young from harassment and engage in verbal quarrels with the men.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Bang-Fai festival provided an opportunity for young men and young women of nearby villages to meet each other.

On the day preceding the actual shooting of skyrockets, the men of each village would go to their individual spirit shrine and set off a miniature rocket. If this rocket flew well, it would be a good omen for plenty of rain and abundance. There would be dancing around the shrine. All participants were male.<sup>10</sup>

Then they would set off with the skyrocket to the host village. Each village had only one skyrocket made for shooting, it was also decorated and beautified. Construction as well as decoration were done by the monks of the village *wat*. The processions from all villages participating in the festival would lead to this *wat*.

There would be dancing, suggestive of sexual intercourses, and playing with phallic symbols. In the past, only men participated in the parade and the dance. Some of them wore women's costumes or covered their faces with mud, and a number wore long false finger-nails.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, Mr.Somchai Nilathi and see *Latthi Thamneum Tang Tang, phak 1*. 1961. Kurusapa Business Organization, Ministry of Education

<sup>8</sup> *Latthi Thamneum Tang Tang, phak 1*.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Mr.Bamphen Na Ubon.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Klausner. 1987. *Op. cit.* pp.43, 44-45.

In the afternoon, all *bang-fai* parades from these villages would go to the *wat* at the signal of the drum called “*Klong Home*”. They would parade around the assembly hall of the *wat* (*Sala Rong-Tham*) three times and put all the rockets together at one place in the *wat*.

In the meantime, ordination of the village boys or blessing of the monks (*hod-song*) took place. Where there was an ordination, the persons to be ordained would ride on horse back at the head of the parade. If there were also *hod-song*, the monks who were to be blessed would be in front of the persons to be ordained.

At night, there would be a “drumming” competition (*seng-klong*) among the participating villages. Each village brought their drum called *klong king* for the competition. During this night, the dancing in groups would continue for the purpose of acquiring alcoholic drinks and sweets. The men would be courting the girls who were sitting at the pavilions (*params*) or helping to prepare food and materials for the next day events in the *wat*.<sup>11</sup>

The next day was the day for shooting the skyrockets. In the morning the feasting of the monks took place, and in the afternoon there would be a procession carrying all the rockets, from the *wat* to the launching pads outside the village. In some localities, the procession might once again stop at the shrine of the village guardian.

The launching pad, might be constructed of wood, or a structure on a tree in case of a large rocket. A competition took place among participating villages as to whose rockets flew higher. The makers of the rockets who won the competition might be blessed by water (*song-nam*). On the other hand, those makers of unsuccessful rockets would be thrown into mud ponds. In the past, these makers of rockets were usually monks. Normally, in Thai society and particularly in the Northeast, monks were highly respected. Such acts as throwing them into mud ponds would be unthinkable. The festival was a special occasion when social norms and behavioral regulations could be ritually dispensed with, and role reversal occurred.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Somsak Chanphosi. 1957. *Pramuan Prapeni Mongkon Thai Esan*. Bangkok. pp.166-167, Chird Chanthong. 1957. *Loas-Thai*. Bangkok. pp.170-171, Suriya Samuttakup. 1990. *Sanyalak Samkhan nai Bun Bang-Fai*. (Important Symbols in Bun Bang-Fai). Khon Kaen University. Bangkok., and from interview of Pho Bamphen Na Ubon.

<sup>12</sup> See S.J. Tambiah. 1970. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*. Cambridge University Press, p.294.

#### 4. FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS OF THE TRADITIONAL BUN BANG-FAI

Being a cluster of important rites, the ritual Bun Bang-Fai naturally had many functions and meanings. This paper divides them into 2 types. The first may be called the

“sociological” ones in the sense that they affect the social integration of the community. The second could be said to be psychological or symbolic ones which work for consistency in world views and expectations. Such consistency and integration would help to create harmony and reduce tension and anxiety among individuals and within society.

The festival, Bun Bang-Fai, took place at the beginning of the rainy season when the annual work on the cultivation of rice would start. In the olden days, the growing of rice was not the affairs of individuals or individual households. The growers had to depend upon the cooperation of a large number of people and their networks of relatives and friends, both within the village and in nearby villages. The types of cooperation needed might be the planting, the harvesting, and in some cases irrigation and in other cases financial assistance. As noted earlier, this festival was an inter-village activity. There were a number of nearby villages participating in the ritual together with one village acting as the host village. Thus it was an occasion when ties of old friends and relatives as well as previous commitments were reaffirmed, and when new ties and commitments were forged. It was also a time when boys and girls from different villages could meet and their meetings could lead to creation of new marriage alliances and expansion of the networks of cooperation. We are told that in this festival, there frequently occurred fighting between men from different villages.<sup>13</sup> These fights were allowed as a part of the rituals and never lead to further animosity. This ritual, therefore, served as an outlet where broken-up friendships could be repaired, and revenge could be taken ritually to get rid of any anger. For these villages and their inhabitants, the festival was the occasion for them to mobilize their relatives and friends for the hard work in the fields during the months ahead.

This ceremony was directly associated with the guardian spirits of the swamp and the village. It was performed to pay them respect, and to request them to confer prosperity and good health and to send rain. If the ritual was not performed, the swamp guardian spirit

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<sup>13</sup> Interview Pho Bam Phen, S.J. Tambiah 1970, *Ibid.*, Suriya Samuttakup. 1990. *Op. cit.*

would be angry. There would be drought and the villagers as well as their buffaloes would fall ill.<sup>14</sup>

A number of ESAN specialists say that the skyrockets were tributes of respect for *Thaen* (god of the sky). A well-known myth, *Phya Kan Kak*, believed to be a Jataka tale, stated that the skyrockets were signals to *Phya Thaen* (sky god) to grant rain on earth. Other specialists said that the shooting of the rockets were acts of worshipping the god *Wassakan* who was the rain maker. Still others said that the rockets were signals between Nagas and the god Brahman in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Bun Bang-Fai was a ritual of men. The skyrockets were made by men. Only men participated in the procession and the dance. Phallics were the dominant symbol, and the shape of the skyrockets, themselves, were similar to a penis. Women were prohibited from participating in most of the important activities of the ritual. Suriya Samuttakup, through analyzing the dominant symbols and types of ritual participants, has proposed that the function of Bun Bang-Fai was to emphasize the dominant role of men as leaders and cultivators of rice. Such leadership role of men needed to be ritually emphasized as the pattern of residence after marriage was maternal (living in the wives village), and inheritance of land was given to daughters only. Married men were strangers among relatives of their wives in women-centered households. *Bun Bang-Fai was the ritual to proclaim the dominant role of men.*<sup>16</sup>

In the author's opinion, traditional Bun Bang-Fai festival must be seen as an important "Rites de Passage".<sup>17</sup>

"Rites de passage are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations. Such

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<sup>14</sup> S.J. Tambiah. 1970. *Op. cit.* p.286.

<sup>15</sup> Suriya Samuttakup. 1990. p.14. "Jataka" tales are stories of Buddha in his previous lives. Naga is a mythical creature, said to be a water serpent. It is believed to live in water and swamp. It possesses much wealth and extra-ordinary power, being the rain-maker. Although being an arch-enemy of the giant-bird, Garudha, both serve the god Vishnu. While Garudha is Vishnu's vehicle, Naga is his bed. Thus there are sculptures of Vishnu lying on the back of Naga, as on the famous lintel of Phanomrung. Naga is also linked with the Buddha. There are many images of seated Buddha sheltered by Naga's hood.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Avan Gennep. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. Also see Victor Turner. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press. particularly Chapter V, pp.93-110.

rites indicate and constitute between states. By 'state' I mean here a relatively fixed or stable condition and would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree."<sup>18</sup>

As the Bun Bang-Fai ritual took place at the beginning of the rainy season, it marked the transition from the relatively-leisured time to the busy period of the cultivation of rice, from activities in the village to the rice field outside, and from living and working in the house to staying and toiling in the field. Most important of all, it was the transition from the household area, where the women were dominant, to the rice field which was under the sphere of male dominance. Ritual was needed to create conscious awareness of the change, to facilitate adaptation to new situation, and to bring about a smooth change over of dominance.

All rites of transition have three phases, i.e. separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation.<sup>19</sup> The liminal period is the middle one, the time of "betwixt and between", when the ritual subject is neither what he has been, nor what he will be.

Bun Bang-Fai was men's ritual. They were those who were changing. During the liminal period, they appeared in women's garments, or wearing long nails, and yet carrying over-sized phallic symbols. They were neither men nor women. Moreover, they smeared their faces with powder or mud.<sup>20</sup>

"The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, "invisible". As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture. A society's secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man" (or not-man-not-woman).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Turner, *Ibid.* p.93.

<sup>19</sup> "The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated" *Ibid.* p.94.

<sup>20</sup> Suriya Samuttakup. *Op. cit.*, See also Victor Turner. *Op. cit.* p.98. "The neophytes are sometimes said to 'be in another place.' They have physical but not social 'reality', hence they have to hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal to see what ought not to be there! Where they are not removed to a sacred place of concealment they are often disguised, in marks or grotesque costumes striped with white, red, or black clay, and the like.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.95. Words in brackets are my own.

It was said that the dancing men in the procession were in a trance.<sup>22</sup> Tambiah reported that the procession was led by the spirit mediums in their traditional dresses, and possession was experienced both by the village guardian spirits' officiates and those he had cured.<sup>23</sup> And as we have said earlier, social regulations were laid aside, the men in the procession were drunk. Quarrels and fights occurred, and hierarchical positions ignored (monks thrown into mud ponds). In Bun Bang-Fai ritual, people were made to reflect upon the male-female relations through these incongruities between women dresses and large phallus. This would bring to conscious awareness social norms and traditional practices and serve indirectly their reinforcement.

Undoubtedly, as stated by Suriya, phallus was a dominant symbol.<sup>24</sup> However, as Tambiah already detected, Naga was another one, which was equal to if not more important than phallus.<sup>25</sup> Skyrockets were always decorated with Naga. In fact they were made to look like Nagas. The procession of drunken, dancing men circling the assembly hall of the *wat* and winding through village roads and trails into the rice field, was like the crawling of a snake. Naga was the mythical water serpent. Naga symbols appeared in many rites of passage. It is used to picture prominently in the old Thai New Year in April.<sup>26</sup> In the (*hod song*) ceremony of water-pouring when a monk was made *Somdet*, the most important part of the altar was a wooden Naga, through which water was poured to fall ultimately upon the head and body of the monk obtaining *Somdet* title.<sup>27</sup>

At ordination into monkhood, the candidate is called "*Nak*," which is the Thai pronunciation of Naga. *Nak* is a person separated from the secular world and entering the sacred world of the *wat*. He is a "liminal personae" in the liminal period of betwixt and between. He shows his transitional status by wearing both a white cloth and a contrasting red or green cloth.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Interview, Pho Bamphen Na Ubon.

<sup>23</sup> S.J. Tambiah, *Op. cit.* p.291.

<sup>24</sup> Suriya Samuttakupt, 1990. *Op. cit.* p.16.

<sup>25</sup> Tambiah, 1970, *Op. cit.* pp.285-311.

<sup>26</sup> Even the throwing of water at Songkran (Thai New Year) is said to be patterned upon the action of Nagas in making rain.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* pp.109.115.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* pp.104-105.



Being the symbol of the middle phase between “separation” and “aggregation”, the Naga was the link between the pre-ritual state and post-ritual state. Thus figures of Nagas are often found on balustrades leading up the hill to the gates of the *wat*, linking the worlds of the sacred and the profane. It has been said also that the rainbow is a Naga linking heaven and earth. Snake is fit to represent symbolically the liminal object because the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one.<sup>29</sup>

In Bun Bang-Fai ritual, there were many opposing states, conditions, or objects which were linked by the ritual. There were women and men, household chores and cultivation work, village and fields, nature and human beings, heaven and earth, sacred and profane, and the Buddha and the guardian spirits. The procession of Bun Bang-Fai festival had much to do with the guardian spirits, and yet it must pay respect to the Buddha in the *wat*. The linkage was the skyrockets, the Nagas, who were involved in both. Nagas were the rockets that linked heaven with earth.<sup>30</sup> Nagas were found in the Buddhist rituals of ordination and *hod song* which took place at the same time as the Bun Bang-Fai ceremony. Although the Bang-Fai ritual was essentially non-Buddhist, it was called Bun Bang-Fai because it included Buddhist rites. And as the king of the Nagas paid respect to the Buddha and gave him shelter with its hood, the Bang-Fai procession paid respect to the Buddha by parading around the assembly hall of the *wat* three times. Thus when the Bun Bang-Fai ceremony was separated from the *wat* in Yasothon, it was objected to by the inhabitants of the *khum* (town quarters).

The myth named “Phadaeng and Nang Ai” is said to give us the origin of Bun Bang-Fai.<sup>31</sup> There are a number of puzzling paradoxes in connection with this myth. The first is that, although it is said to be a story explaining the origin of Bun Bang-Fai, it does not tell us anything about the origin of Bun Bang-Fai. All that was said about Bun Bang-Fai is that a rocket competition was organized by Nang Ai's father in which the winner would be awarded the hand of Nang Ai in marriage. Secondly, although the name of the myth is “Phadaeng and Nang Ai”, it is actually a story about Pangkee, the Naga, who loved Nang Ai. In his effort to

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<sup>29</sup> Other symbols often found to represent liminal objects are: - huts and tunnels (at once tombs and wombs), the moon (for the same one waxes and wanes), bear (which is at once the mark of a new born infant and a corpse prepared for burial). “This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterize the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” Victor Turner 1967. *Op. cit* p.99.

<sup>30</sup> It is very interesting in this respect to note that, perhaps, in Bun Bang-Fai, Naga was somehow identified with phallus. Suriya almost says that the rockets are phallus symbols. Rockets link between earth and heaven that bring about rain and fertilities.

<sup>31</sup> For the two versions of the myth, see Tambiah, 1970, *Op. cit.* pp.294-298.

obtain her, he was first transformed into a human being to watch the rocket competition, and later into a beautiful white squirrel with golden bells round his neck and melodious voice. Later he was killed and his meat was eaten by all except widows. Being Naga as well as his successive transformations showed that he was a liminal object. All those who had eaten his meat died because it was sacred and dangerous. And yet, through consuming the object, swamps and lakes were created as the land was flooded by the power of the Nagas.<sup>32</sup>

Mary Douglas in her famous book, *Purity and Danger*, has proposed that the concept of pollution is a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction.<sup>33</sup> And thus "What is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean."<sup>34</sup> Victor Turner concludes that:

"... one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another, or may be both; or neither here nor there."<sup>35</sup>

Thus it was generally believed that the skyrockets would bring bad luck upon the owners of the houses where they fell. It was a bad omen even to dream of a skyrocket, but it was the decision of the Governor of Yasothon to have the Bun Bang-Fai procession marching into the center of the town.

## 5. CHANGES OF THE RITUAL IN THE RURAL AREA

Much changes have occurred in the organization and performances of the festival in the Northeast in general. However, the rate and extent of the changes appear to differ across location, geographical alteration, occupations of the people, access to information, and intrusion of outside influences. Here the paper focuses on change in general through

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<sup>32</sup> Tambiah has interpreted the myth as follows: "The manifest meaning of the story is that the killing and eating of the squirrel results in the disappearance of human settlements and their transformation into swamps. .... the latent meaning is that the eating of the meat represents the union of man and nature. The swamps and lakes containing perennial water are the product of this union.... Thus, while the plot of the myth overtly predicates antagonism between man and nature, the underlying message is the resolution of the relationship between them in terms of fertile union and sharing of common properties." *Ibid.* p.299.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Douglas, 1966. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>34</sup> Victor Turner, 1966. *Op. cit.* p.97.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p.97.

considering different types of agents who bring change and through an analysis of factors contributing to change. As far as possible, data gathered from observation of the ritual and interviews of village elders and a Bang-Fai expert in the village, Ban Phue, near the town Khon Kaen, will be used to understand the changes which have occurred.

It has been observed that Bun Bang-Fai festival among isolated *Kui* communities in Sri Saket has suffered the least change. Although these people have taken over the ritual from the Laotian people, they appear to have preserved the original performances. Thus the dances are still done by men only.<sup>36</sup> In other places, women have been involved in the dances and parades of the Festival for long time past (about 30 years or so ago in Yasothon).<sup>37</sup>

There appear to be two kinds of dances in *Bang-Fai* parade. There are the formal, dressed dancers who stand towards the front of the procession, and the unruly dances of drunken or semi-drunken people towards the back. In most places female dancers, mostly young women and girls, have taken over the formal, dressed dances completely.<sup>38</sup> Regarding the unruly dances, there are now both men and women dancing together.

We do not know when the procession was divided into two sections. Originally, there should have been only one section consisting of male villagers dancing the ritual. The formal dance would have appeared when it became time to perform for strangers and to compete with each other over beauty and skill in the dance.

Similarly, the skyrockets themselves became two types. Rockets, which are to be fired, are separated from those that are heavily decorated and embellished. The latter are called "*Bang-Eh*" and are presented as a heavily decorated image of a skyrocket. The former are called "*Bang-Jut*" (firing rocket). These are stripped of decorations, and inserted with larger amount of gunpowder so that they would travel higher into the sky or cover a longer distance.

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<sup>36</sup> The words in the dance are Laos language. See Nidhi Eoseewong, 1992. *Kan Thongthiew nai Bun Bang-Fai lae Kan Kae Salak Mai*. TDRI., Bangkok. Among development workers in the Northeast, the *Kui* are generally considered to be the ethnic group most resistant to change. "*Kui*" are often called "*Suay*" by Thai people. It is sometimes considered to be derogatory.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> In some areas, it is said that such take over by women had occurred about 18 years ago. Interview, Somchai Nilathi, Mahasarakham Teachers' College.

There can be observed, then, two trends of change, one of them being more concentrated on the “show” aspect, while another gives more power to rockets for competition. The first might have come about because, at the present time, communication has become easier with networks of reasonably good roads and buses and new types of spectators may be found. These are people who are no longer farmers and would not be participating in agricultural activities with the villagers. In some places, they are town people who come out to watch the Bang-Fai festival in the villages.

These changes are characterized by “things” imported from Bangkok or regional centers. The most notable consist of patterns and decorations of the *Bang-Eh*, and dancing by groups of girls. Pho Bamphen said that it was an imitation of the “Ramwong Troupe” (commercial dancing and singing troupe) called “Phuyai Hiew” in Yasothon. There was training of the girl dancers to appear more professional with new styles and gestures. This is partly to please a new type of spectators who prefer female dancers over drunken men.

More gun powder is packed into the skyrockets, and the sizes of the actual skyrockets have become larger that are made of steel or nylon pipes instead of bamboos. Gambling and betting have become involved in the competition of skyrocket firing so that the sizes of skyrockets have grown proportionally to the amount of money involved in betting.

Emphasis on the “show” and the “competition” aspects of the festival have put rocket-making into the hands of the specialists. No longer are the monks involved as makers of rockets. There are famous rocket-makers, and *Bang-Eh* decorators are known in various localities. When the festival is organized anywhere, these specialists would be commissioned to make the rockets and the *Bang-Eh*. People in Yasothon go so far as Nongkhai and Srisaket to get their rockets made, and pay as high as 15,000 baht for a rocket (which has a chance of failing and does not fly). From the actual observation of a Yasothon festival, only one in three rockets being fired would fly well. The rest may break up on the launching pad or in the sky. There are in many localities occasions for firing of skyrockets just for competition and betting without the accompanying rites and ceremonies. In many cases, it is no longer Bun Bang-Fai or a Skyrocket Festival but merely a shooting competition.

Rockets have become more powerful. Their bodies being steel or nylon, they have turned out to be truly dangerous things, not only in thought and dreams as before. This fact together with the increase in the population and number of houses have made it impossible to hold rocket festivals in a large number of places. It is said that the firing of skyrockets has

been prohibited in a number of localities because of the danger and the lack of empty space for the firing.

Apart from this case of firing rockets for gambling only, have other aspects of the festival ceased to be a ritual, particularly the ritual of transition? From observation at a village Ban Phue near Khon Kaen, it apparently is not so although important changes have occurred.

The Bun Bang-Fai festival used to take place together with the ordination of monks and *hod song*. Now the celebration of the attainment of high position by local monks is more important. This year (1992) the Bun Bang-Fai festival coincided with the celebration of a local monk attaining a higher position in the hierarchy of the Sangha. There was a parade around the village. The particular monk was led in an open and decorated car, followed by a truck loaded with 12-13 *Naks* (persons on the verge of ordination into monkhood). Following the truck were the parents of the *Nak* carrying the monks' attributes (robes, etc.). Then it was followed by a group of uniformed boys and girls dancing in trained gestures. This was the youth group organized by the officer of the Public Welfare Department. A group of men with drums followed a huge crowd of men and women dancing and drinking and enjoying themselves immensely. They were hired from somewhere else to perform at this village for the occasion. The procession ended up with 5 elephants hired from Surin, a province in Southern Esan, to be in this procession. The skyrockets were brought in to join part of the procession.

The rite of passage remains in the ordination of monks and the celebration of the obtainment of the title in the Sangha. There is the element of "show" here, particularly in the troop of 5 elephants, the drummers, and in the dancing of the uniformed youth group. It may be noted that these "shows" are for the villagers to see. The drummers and the elephants are from other provinces.

The members of the youth group have been separated from the rest of the villagers by the Central Government officials. In fact officials of the Central Government have induced many changes in the ritual. The villagers report that the Governor has prohibited the display of phallic symbols and other similar sexual objects such as figures of copulating animals or human beings. The dancing of the specially dressed members of the youth group led by the Government official and the development worker shows prominently the presence of the Central Government.

From interviews with a village elder and a local skyrocket expert, it is interesting that both of them play down the Skyrocket festival. The village elder would emphasize the ordination ceremony, i.e. how many monks were ordained last year; how many this year, and so on, although he knows full well and acknowledges that the ordination takes place on that day because it is a day of Bun Bang-Fai. It is as if there is something to be ashamed about Bun Bang-Fai. The skyrocket expert of the village says that rocket festival in the village is insignificant in comparison to other places. The rockets are only small ones. He suggests watching the firing of rockets at Nam Phong where he has been. All the rocket-making experts in the Northeast Region would take their best and most powerful rockets to Nam Phong on appointed days to compete with each other, where one can observe the best rockets that fly both high and far.<sup>39</sup>

Thus we can see the process of overcoming the local culture by the National Culture. It may be a natural process of creating a nation-state out of the semi-autonomous little towns and rural communities, which were not very well connected to the national center of Bangkok in the olden days. The local people are trained to see through the same eye-glasses as the central officials and to appreciate, in their own culture, only what the Bangkok officials like. The ordination of monks is within the central hierarchy of the Sangha. The bestowing of title and rank to the rural monks who have passed central examinations is also a part of the activities in support of the central hierarchy of the Sangha. Thus the celebration of such ranks and titles is made a big-affair. The traditional *hod song*, when the villagers themselves raised one of the local monks to the position of *Somdet*, could no longer be found. In many places the shrines of the guardian spirits have been pulled down and the spirits driven away by wandering monks.

Ban Phue, now, is very much different from what it was. Ban Phue is now a wealthy village in an irrigated area very near the booming town, Khon Kaen. Women grow vegetables in the field all through the year. Women go selling vegetables in the town, Khon Kaen, and the unmarried ones go to work in factories there. Young men go to work as far away as Bangkok and even Singapore. The Rite of passage from the women-centered household area to male dominated rice field is no longer relevant. The Rite of Ordination is still important since it is the most important way for the sons to repay debts of gratitude to their parents, particularly to the mothers.

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<sup>39</sup> Interviews, Villagers in Ban Phue in May and June, 1992.

## 6. BUN BANG-FAI CEREMONY IN YASOTHON

Here, the paper follows Victor Turner in distinguishing “Ritual” from “Ceremony”. While the term “ritual” is applied to forms of religious behavior associated with social transitions, “the term ‘ceremony’ has closer bearing on religious behavior associated with social states, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance. Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory.”<sup>40</sup>

With such understanding, the traditional Bun Bang-Fai is considered to be ritual, but the festival in Yasothon constitutes a ceremony. While the ritual Bun Bang-Fai in the olden days clearly marks the transition from the time of rest and light work in the household to the time of heavy labor in the rice field, and from the women-centered area to male dominant sphere, the ceremony Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon serves to confirm the hierarchical positions of different categories of people in the town, the region, and the nation.

Since Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon has become a national event, the Governor, the highest national representative in the province, has become the Chairman of the Organizing Committee and has a great deal of weight in the way the ceremony is organized. In 1992, the Commander of the Second Army was the Chair Person of the ceremony. The members of the Municipal Authority Board, who are elected by the citizens of the town, are much involved. Earlier (prior to 1966, or 1977, or 1987 according to different sources of information)<sup>41</sup> the Municipal Authority was the main organizer of the ceremony.

This festival is regularly organized on Saturday and Sunday of the second week of May. The people who spend most effort in the work for the festival are the inhabitants of “*Khum Wat*”. The town Yasothon was traditionally divided into quarters, each having a *wat*. Thus the quarter is call “*Khum Wat*”.<sup>42</sup> Each *khum wat* would have a skyrocket and organizing a troupe of dancers for the procession.

The Municipal Authority gave monetary support to each *khum wat* for this purpose. In 1992, each *khum wat* was given 30,000 baht each. Only one third of this sum was for the making of the skyrocket (10,000 baht). The rest (20,000 baht) was for the preparation of the

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<sup>40</sup> Victor Turner. 1967, *Op. cit.* p.95.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews, Pho Bamphen Na Ubon said to be 1966, Mr. Sawai Sunthara said to be 1977, and others said as recently as 1987.

<sup>42</sup> “*Khum*” means a group of houses, usually related.

dancers and the procession. Of course, this amount was insufficient. The construction of the skyrocket alone whether outside specialists, or specialists of the *khum* were used, cost 15,000 baht and above.

The preparation of the dances was also costly. The Municipal Authority laid down the minimum number of dancers required from each *khum*. Special dresses had to be made for them, and training in the dance had to be given. Thus *khum* leaders had to ask for contributions from *khum* members. Contributions from businesses in the town also had to be requested. Thus the rockets and the procession would be sprinkled with placards of advertisements.

The length of the procession has extended longer and longer each year as increasing number of troupes of dancers join the parade. At the head of the procession was a troupe of spirit mediums, usually elderly ladies with the exception of the leader who was Pho Bamphen Na Ubon. Every member of this troupe wore red dress with head gear. It was the only portion of the procession which started at the *wat* (*Wat Klang*), and danced to the shrine of the guardian spirit of the town (at the town's sacred pillar). After worshipping at this shrine, they danced to the shrine of *Pu Chao*, another guardian spirit of the town. Then, prior to the opening of the ceremony, at the town hall, this troupe danced to the statue of King Chulalongkorn, which had been erected in the year 1988 or 1989.<sup>43</sup> Then, after the opening ceremony, this troupe of elderly persons led the procession from the town hall out to the old police station. These elderly people had to dance in the sun for longer than half of the day. At this age (Pho Bamphen is about 70 years old), it is surprising how they could have managed it. It was said that they could do it because they were possessed by spirits while they were dancing. While thus possessed, they would, of course, be in the liminal state. Their head dresses are said to make them Nagas. This troupe is called *Mahesak Lak Muang*.<sup>44</sup>

The other troupes did not start from the *wat*. They came together in the large empty space in front of the Town Hall. After the opening ceremony by the Governor the procession began to move. Government agencies, particularly schools in the town and at every *amphoe* (district), were required to send in a troupe of dancers. These dancing groups of various

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<sup>43</sup> In 1988 the Town (i.e. Governor and officials) organized *Bun Bang-Fai Taksinawat* when the procession was going around to every *amphoe* (district) in the Province. Its purpose was to collect funds for building the statue of King Chulalongkorn in front of the Town Hall. Interview, Mrs. Sumalee Chaiprasert.

<sup>44</sup> In the Northeast, the important guardian spirits in the shrines at large villages are often called *Mahesak Lak Muang* is the town's Pillar. It is believed to be the residence of the guardian spirit of the town.



government agencies together with their *Bang-Eh* would follow the troupe of *Mahesak Lak Muang*. Then there were troupes from *amphoes* in the Northern part of the Province, and also from each *khum wat*. In the olden days, there were only the rockets and dancers from *khum wat*. Now the central Government Agencies took the lead, and the *khum wat* followed. There were also rockets and dancing troupes of associations and unruly groups of dancing people at the tail of the procession. Each of the formal troupes was required to have at least 45 dancers in the parade.

Besides competition over the best-flying rockets, there was competition over beautiful rockets. There were also dancing contests of the troupes in the formal part of the procession. And also there was a beauty contest called “*Thida Bang-Fai Ko*” (Sparkling Daughters of the Skyrockets).

We can see that Bun Bang-Fai has become a “show” performance for others, be them tourists or dignitaries. The decoration of the skyrockets as well as the appearances of the dancers and the dances are catered to please what Yasothon inhabitants and officials think the taste of the outsiders. Thus the decorative patterns became more like those of Bangkok and the Central Region. The dancing became much more organized and trained as if to be performed on the stage. The dress of the *Thida Bang-Fai Ko* became a little more revealing, according to what was thought to be what the tourists and the dignitaries liked. Stands were set up by the side of the roads, and tickets sold for seats to watch the procession.

Unlike the dances in the procession in Ban Phue village, where everyone was enjoying him or herself, the dancers in the parade in Yasothon in the formal part were extremely serious and laboring to do the best they could. This comment applies to both the young girls from schools as well as to those from the *amphoe* (district) and *khum wat*.

The places of the various groups of dancers in the parade showed their positions in the social hierarchy. Thus, the government agencies must come before the *khum wat*. It is said that even some of the prominent positions in the parade are given to daughters of prominent persons in town. Thus the ceremony reaffirms political positions and social status.

## 7. SOCIO-POLITICAL FUNCTION OF BUN BANG-FAI IN YASOTHON

Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon, with respect to its socio-political function, has been analysed excellently by Prof. Nidhi Eoseewong.<sup>45</sup> Only a summary of it can be presented here.

Yasothon society consists of four groups or categories of people. The largest are the *khum* people, mostly of Thai-Laotian ethnicity. The town had grown up from an agglomeration of villages. These are characterized by kin-based organizations. Similar to villages, each has a *wat* (temple) of its own. Thus the communities are called “*Khum Wat*”. *Khum* are not official town quarters, but natural communities. They could organize certain activities such as Bun Bang-Fai in the name of the *khum*. Most of *khum* people are no longer engaged in agriculture as their main occupation. They have become laborers, service workers, small traders, and peddlers.

In 1989 the Municipal Authority divided the town into 22 wards, each having a committee for development. *Khum* also has its committee. Fortunately, leaders of *khum* committee and those of ward’s committee are usually found to be the same persons. Members of the Municipal Council are elected. Their chance of success depends largely upon votes from the *khum* people. Thus officers of the Municipal Authority have to care about the interest of the *khum* people and render assistance to them. Bun Bang-Fai is an activity in which the *khum* people are the main actors. Being considered to belong to the *khum* people, the Bun Bang-Fai festival is a channel where by local politicians can get and give favors to the *khum* people. And it is also an instrument, through which relationships could be forged, whereby local and national resources can be tapped by the *khum* people.

The business people, mostly Chinese descendants, live in the business section of the town. They are wealthy and largely related to each other by blood. They have since 1975 entered into local politics. Many have become Municipal Councilors and they need the support of the *khum* people for their political activities.<sup>46</sup> Assistance or at least cooperation from government officials are also required for the operation of their business activities.

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<sup>45</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, 1992. *Kan Thongtheiw Nai Ngan Bun Bang-Fai Lae Kan Kae Salak Mai*, TDRI, Bangkok.

<sup>46</sup> Dararat Mettarikanond, *Phunam Thongthin Esan kap Khruakai Kwam Samphan*, Khon Kaen 1992.

The third group consists of the bureaucrats. There are two types: the active ones who are town officials, mostly sent to work in Yasothon by the Central Government; the other are retired officials, who are now senior citizens and critical of activities of the *khum* and business people.

The retired officials used to be Municipal councilors and Mayors before the business people entered into politics. They were the traditional patrons of the *khum* people. However, without sufficient wealth, they are unable to gain the support needed for local politics. They have become critical of Bun Bang-Fai, because the festival brings the *khum* and the business people together and provides the business people with an opportunity to make investments for local politics.<sup>47</sup>

The active town officials, including the Governor, have recently taken much more interest in the festival. In the year 1977, TAT came to promote Bun Bang-Fai to be the Festival of the Province, Yasothon, by giving it the recognition as an important tourist attraction. TAT provided some small funds for the festival organization and arranged public relations.<sup>48</sup> It would seem that at first the Municipal Authority was still the organizer, although in 1991 the Governor became the Chairman of the organizing committee. The Municipal Councilors and the Mayor remained the coordinator of the *khum* people. The reason given for the Governor's takeover was that the status of Bun Bang-Fai was to be raised to the Provincial and National level.

“1991..... made many changes to develop both the structure and the management system, that is to raise the level of the festival and make improvements in order to put it on the tourist market, which is the national-level industry”<sup>49</sup>.

These changes, geared to create better tourist attractions, led to conflicts in Yasothon society. Bun Bang Fai serves, sociologically, to link these four groups of people together in at least three ways. The first was that Bun Bang Fai is essentially the ceremony of the *khum* people in the sense that they still constitute the main actors of the show. Traditionally, the festival has always been their own. They and their monks made the skyrockets, paraded them

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<sup>47</sup> Interview Mr. Somchit, previously Head Master of the Local Government School, and ex-Mayor.

<sup>48</sup> Reported by Sumalee Chairasert from interview of Mr. Sathit Phaksiphaeng, Head of the Changwat Office.

<sup>49</sup> “Message from the Governor of Yasothon” in pamphlet for Bun Bang-Fai year 1992.

around, and fired them. Because other groups of people supported it, they themselves as the traditional owners of the festival were proud of it. On its becoming recognized as a national tourist attraction, they have become even more proud of it. Thus we can observe that they are the persons who demand the festival. And they are more critical of the changes recently introduced by the Governor than the other groups of people .

When the Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon became a national tourist attraction in 1977, it upgraded the status of Yasothon in the eyes of Government officials there. Tourism is an industry which government after government has been promoting. It is like a religion.<sup>50</sup> Faith in tourism as a talisman creating wealth and prosperity is so firm that no one has ever questioned it. Thus, introduction of what officials think would attract tourists follows, stage-like troupes of young girls performing rehearsed dances, beauty contest of the daughters of *Bang-Fai*, elaborately decorated *Bang-Eh* of gigantic sizes, etc. The festival must be spectacular. Such promotion has put Yasothon in competition with other well-known towns. Thus, it must be the Governor who organizes the festival and the Town Hall must be the place for its performance rather than the local, undignified *wat* as it used to be. Its success would bring rewards from the Central government.

On the other hand Bun Bang-Fai brings the officials closer to the *khum* people, for Bun Bang-Fai is performed mainly by the inhabitants of the *khum* and belongs to them. Officials have to depend on the *khum* people in organizing the festival. They have to appreciate the *khum* people for their performances which, if successful, would bring rewards to the provincial officials.

Secondly, Bun Bang-Fai has become an instrument which serves the political ambitions of the business group and the economic interests of the *khum* people. It provides an occasion and an opportunity for the Provincial Councilor to transfer public funds and to contribute both money and energy (in requesting others for funds) to support the activities of the *khum* people. As one of the ex-Mayors who is a retired bureaucrat said, "The *khum* people are crazy about Bun Bang-Fai, and the Chinese businessmen are giving them money for it in order to get votes in local elections".<sup>51</sup> On the part of the *khum* people, the festival provides an opportunity for the relatively poor urbanites to gain access to public funds and

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<sup>50</sup> In the word of Prof. Nidhi Eoseewong.

<sup>51</sup> From an interview in Yasothon, June 1992.

support from private enterprises. It is a rare opportunity indeed for them to be allowed to manage some funds from public and private sources.

Moreover, the festival has been turned into a show, a kind of theatrical and spectacular performance for tourists and outsiders. The *bang-eh* becomes larger and more heavily decorated, and *bang-jut* becomes more packed with power. Both types of skyrockets need to be made by specialists who construct them for rent or for sale. Some groups of people from certain *khum* could earn their living that way. Gambling on skyrocket-firing competitions, as well as awards for best-decorated *bang-eh*, have helped to create specialists and enable them to earn a living by constructing rockets and *bang-eh*.

The third kind of linkages which Bun Bang-Fai provides for the integration of all groups and categories of people in the town of Yasothon is spirit worship. The importance of spirit worship in Bun Bang-Fai can be estimated from answers given by the *khum* people to the question, "What will happen if the festival, Bun Bang-Fai, is not observed?" The *khum* people answered immediately, without a second thought, that the guardian spirits and other spirits would be very angry. They would kill or drive away the Governor and the town dignitaries. Misfortune would fall upon the inhabitants of the town, and many deaths would occur.<sup>52</sup>

As regards the role of spirit worship as an important factor for the integration of Yasothon society, the *Lak-Muang* shrine (Town Pillar) must be considered the most important of all. An excellent analysis of the importance of this shrine for the integration of the town Yasothon has been given by Prof. Nidhi Eoseewong.<sup>53</sup>

Traditionally, there was no cult of *Lak Muang* (Town Pillar) in the Northeast. It is a custom imported from the Central Region during the Bangkok Period (1782-1873). Much improvement was made to it by a district chief. The *Lak-Muang* cult is a religious cult of Central Thai officialdom.<sup>54</sup>

The present building of the shrine, although made in Central Thai shape of Sala, is decorated with Chinese patterns and symbols. Even the altar is a Chinese-type altar. The Chinese-descended, business people of Yasothon town worship the *Lak Muang*.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview *khum* leaders, Yasothon, June 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, 1992. *Op.cit.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

In China, there has always been the custom of having town pillar and the guardian spirit of the town. When the Chinese came to Yasothon, they must have come to worship the *Lak Muang*. Thus the *Lak Muang* shrine has a Chinese placard saying “old *Lak Muang* shrine”, and another one which says that this shrine has been shining at this location for a very long time”<sup>55</sup> The present mayor of Yasothon, who has Chinese ancestors, says that the local Chinese call the shrine “*Ping Tao*”, and that the shrine is worshipped by the Sino-Thai business people as well as by the *khum* people.

As we have already observed, Bun Bang-Fai, was traditionally a rite involving the worshipping of the guardian spirit of the village. At the festival in the town Yasothon, the *Mahesak* troupe led by Pho Bamphen go to the *Lak-Muang* shrine to dance, pay respect, and fire the “wishing” rocket of miniaturized size. In this aspect, the *Lak Muang* shrine replaces the shrine of the guardian spirit of the village for the *khum* people.

*Mahesak* is said to be the spirit or spirits of the old ruling princes of Yasothon. There is a widespread belief of *Mahesak* in the Northeast. It seems, somehow, connected with *Lak Muang*, together called *Mahesak Lak Muang*. Some local guardian spirits, worshipped by more people than just in the village, are sometimes called *Mahesak*. The followers of *Pu Chao* shrine seem to be limited to the *khum* people, and maybe only to a few *khum* only. Similarly, there is another spirit shrine, the shrine of *Chao Mae Song Nang*, or female deities. It looks as if it could be another local guardian of another group of *khum*. It is to be noted that the *Mahesak* group does not go to dance at the shrine of *Chao Mae Song Nang*, but Pho Bamphen gave an offering there on the day prior to the start of Bun Bang-Fai.

*Mahesak* group was the only one which started very early in the morning from *Wat Klang* and which marched to dance at *Lak Muang* shrine and later at *Pu Chao* shrine. It even came to dance in front of the statue of Rama V at the Town Hall. *Mahesak* dancers are all spirit mediums and are said to be dancing in a trance. They are all wearing head dresses which are said to be the symbol of Nagas.

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<sup>55</sup> “Tyieng Huang”

## 8. CONCLUSION

### A. From Ritual to Ceremony: Evolution of Bun Bang-Fai

Traditionally, Bun Bang-Fai was an important rite of passage. It marked the beginning of the cultivation period of rice, the movement from inside the village to the field outside and from the women-centered household area to the cultivation area where men assumed leadership. As it was the men's ritual, the participants were men and the ritual symbols reflected their changing role. Liminality was important, signifying the state "betwixt and between". This was re-enforced by simultaneous organization of Buddhist rites of passage for men such as ordination into monkhood, and *hod-song* as parts of the Bun Bang-Fai festival. The ritual was also a request for rain from spirits, the guardian spirits of the village and Phya Thaen, god of the sky. Naga, as a liminal object, was present in all of these rites and rituals. It was the *Nak* in the ordination ceremony, the head dresses of the dancing men, and the decoration of the skyrockets. It was the link between the sacred and the profane, human beings and nature, household and the fields, women and men, and earth and heaven. The Naga-shaped rockets were shot to the sky to remind Phya Thaen to grant rain. The myth of the festival related a story of a Naga prince, his transformation into human beings and animal, and the dangers which arise from eating his flesh as well as the blessing from the creation of swamps and lakes, the sources of water for cultivation. Through symbolic presentations the villagers were made aware of the necessity for change and its importance. They were brought to think upon the roles of men and women, the relationship between them, and about the traditional norms of behavior. It is a preparation for changing roles by men and the acceptance of changed roles by women.

Moreover, as it was an intervillage festival, it was a mobilization of relatives and friends within the village and from nearby villages for cooperation in the coming rice-cultivating season.

Many changes have occurred in the performances of the ritual everywhere. The smallest change would seem to be the festival which is conducted in isolated areas of the Kui community in Srisaket province. Men only are performing the dances, and such symbols of sexual objects and activities still prevail. In a village in Khon Kaen, the Buddhist rites of ordination and in some years the celebration of title of monks (similar to *hod song*) have overshadowed the traditional *bang-fai* parade and dances in importance. The dances are done by both men and women. It is still largely a rite of passage but only for those who would be

ordained as monk. The parade has become more of a ceremony confirming the status of people in the village.

Thus the parade was led by the monk whose title was to be celebrated. This was followed by a truck-load of *Nak* in white robes and shaven heads. Following this truck marched the village elders carrying attributes of the monks-to-be. Then came a uniformed youth group organized by the government's development worker of the *tambon* (sub-district). Between this dancing group and another were the drummers who were hired from another province. There followed a large crowd of men and women dancing to the beats of the drums with intense joy on their faces. Lastly, there was, for only part of the way, a *bang-fai* followed by the five elephants which the villagers had hired from Surin to show in the village.

We may note that the original form of Bun Bang-Fai was rite of passage. All members of the village were involved, although the main actors were men. If we divide the people into actors and watchers, the men were the actors while the women were spectators. And yet the women were more involved than spectators for they have roles to play in the ritual. Their acceptance of the changing role of men and themselves from the domestic area to the cultivation area was necessary. It was an internal, local affair in which every member of the community was involved, as they all would be participating in moving into the field and planting rice. As it was a ritual of transition, the uncertainty of the sex role and hierarchical structure were symbolically shown and emphasis was placed upon the linkages between two structured states. The festival had the combination of animist rites and Buddhist rites centering upon the transition of men from one state to another.

Bun Bang-Fai as organized in the village in Khon Kaen province illustrates changes which have occurred as a consequence of topographical, demographic, and economic changes. The village is now in an irrigated area where double cropping can be done. The married women are out in the fields almost all year growing vegetables. The young girls go to work in factories in Khon Kaen town during the day. Most young men go to work in Bangkok and even Singapore. The village has become wealthy. Rice growing is registered as its main occupation, although the majority of its income would have come from other sources. Bun Bang-Fai as a rite of passage in itself no longer has the same meaning and significance. However, the village is homogeneous particularly as regards the occupation of household heads and their spouses.

Yet the village still celebrates the Bun Bang-Fai. It is still a rite of passage, although the emphasis is now upon the ordination of village youths into monkhood. Ordination, as rite



of passage, still retains significant meaning, for sons to be ordained as monks transfers much merit upon their parents and thus repays their debt of gratitude. It is still an important occasion in which all the villagers would joyously participate.

However, the sphere of liminality is now reduced to the ordination rite and the *Nak*. In the Bun Bang-Fai procession, the *Nak* still leads the procession, and thus liminality remains a part of the parade. Another element, that of the “show”, has crept into the procession. There is the show of the five elephants from Surin, the hired troupe of drummers, maybe from Srisaket, and the uniformed dancers of the Government-organized youth group. It must be noted that all these shows are for the local people to see. They all remain small and homely. Even the skyrocket is a small one, *bang-fai muen*, (12-30 pounds of gun powder). There is no *bang-eh*.

The ritual has partly become a “ceremony”. “ Thus ranks and statuses of people in the community are reaffirmed in the procession. The village elders, important personages of the village, led the procession, following only the *Nak*. The status and power of the Central Government is shown indirectly in the presence of the dancing, uniformed youth group, which walks in front of the band and the ordinary villagers.

Thus, one direction of the evolution of the Bun Bang-Fai festival is to become more Buddhist-oriented. Its ritual nature has become more limited, and the activities have become a ceremony. The presence of the Central Government has made itself felt and begun to show its status and power in the organization of the procession. It has been commented insightfully that the turning of Bun Bang-Fai to be more Buddhist in fact reflects the increasing power and intrusion of the Central Government, for the Sangha belongs to the Central Government. On the decline is the belief in the guardian spirits which are a part of the local culture.<sup>56</sup>

Another direction which Bun Bang-Fai has taken is to become completely non religious. That is, it has become just a contest of the strength of the skyrockets and the skills of their specialized producers. Of course, it ceases to be Bun Bang-Fai and a festival. The contest may be held at any time of the year. It is an area for betting and advertising the ability to produce *Bang-Fai* of specialized, commercial groups.

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<sup>56</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong. Thus, in many localities in Esan, there was once a monk who came to drive away *phi pu-ta*, the spirit guardians of the village.

Bun Bang-Fai, as organized in Yasothon, has largely become a ceremony and a show. Its nature as a ritual remains only with the actions of *Mahesak* group. Mediums, when possessed, become the link between the world of the spirits and the world of men. They are thus liminal objects. The actual *bang-jut* themselves are also such an object because as they travel upwards, they serve as the link between earth and heaven, human beings and the gods. It may be noted that the dancing of the *Mahesak* group only starts from *Wat Klang*, the Central Temple of Yasothon, marching to dance at the shrine of *Lak Muang* (The Town Pillar) and then the shrine of *Pu Chao*, which is probably the guardian spirit of the *Khum* people. Lastly, this group ends by dancing in front of the statue of King Chulalongkorn. All these activities of *Mahesak* are done before the Governor opens the festival at the Town Hall.

*Mahesak* is the only group that wears head dresses, and these head dresses symbolize Naga. *Mahesak* is the liminal object that links Buddha, the Town guardian spirit, the *khum* guardian spirit, and the god of the Central Government, the statue of King Chulalongkorn. All of them together to bless the town Yasothon and its inhabitants.

The opening of the festival by the Governor ends the ritual and begins the ceremony and the show. Now we meet with the huge procession of well trained dancers, girls from schools, and government agencies, similar troupes of girl dancers from various *tambon* and *khum*. Name of each troupe is carried by one or two beautiful girls dressed in the Central Thai dresses which are a little more revealing. They would later participate in the beauty contest of *Thida Bang-Fai Ko*. Each group has a huge, heavily decorated *Bang-Fai Eh* (model of skyrocket), and an increasingly larger and more powerful *Bang-Fai Jut*. The number of these dancing troupes and the *Bang-Fai* has been increasing almost every year. About 50 years ago there were only about 15 skyrockets in the procession. In this year's procession (1992), there are 60 skyrockets. Fifty-five of them are of the traditional sizes with 12-15 pounds of gun-powder (*Bang-Fai Muan*). Seventeen of them are *Bang-Fai Saen* with 120-150 pounds of gun-powder. There is one *Bang-Fai Lan* (1,200 pounds of gun powder). It belongs to the Governor.

The ceremony of Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon actually confirms the status of people in the town. The procession, including its starting point and opening as well as the parade, actually shows the relative status and rank of people in the Region. It raises to high status the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Commander who is invited to chair the ceremony, the Governor who is the head of the organizers, the mayors and others. Government organizations such as Government schools and agencies, including the *amphoe* (district) officers, parade in front of the *khum's* dancing show. The huge lawn before the Town Hall (Governor's Office) has become the

center of the festival instead of the *wat*. Ordination rites or *hod song* have been cut off. The whole show is now televised.

It has to be said that the ceremony has now become a “show”, a performance for outsiders to see. It is for the Governor and his staff to use in competition with other towns and cities over who is the most modern and most capable regarding money-generating capabilities. As tourism is unquestioningly accepted as a major money-generating industry, it is used as an excuse for taking over the management of the festival from the Municipal Authority and the *khum* people. Bun Bang-Fai is now a major national tourist attraction. It is deemed it should be managed by the Governor.

The changes introduced by the Governor and the officials can be summed up in the word “spectacular”. Everything has to be made spectacular and gigantic. The increasing size of the skyrockets, the increasing number of dancers in each troupe, the more intensive training, and the specialized work on decoration and making of rockets lead to conflicts and controversies.

The most serious conflict occurred in 1971 when the Governor ordered that the parade would march from outer area to the City Hall to bring *Bang-Fai* into the town. As *Bang-Fai* is traditionally believed to be a “liminal” object of dangers and pollution, much protest arose from the *khum* people saying that it would bring death to the town people. Eventually the Governor had to give in. In 1992, the Town Hall became the starting point of the parade instead.<sup>57</sup>

Aiming so much at making the festival a spectacle, the *Bang-Fai Eh* has become so huge that is it now impossible to go around the assembly hall in the *wat*, or even get into the *wat*. They say that the *wat* has become too small to accommodate the skyrockets and the procession. Thus Bun Bang-Fai in Yasothon has been separated from the *wat*. Some of the *khum* people complain about it. With this separation, the ordination rites are no longer part of the festival.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Sumalee Chaiprasert reports.

<sup>58</sup> Interview, *khum* leaders. Some says Bun Bang-Fai has become Bap Bang-Fai, i.e. Merit making festival of Bang-Fai has become sinful festival of Bang-Fai.

Display of symbolic objects such as phallus has been prohibited. In the festival of the year 1992, such display could be unobtrusively seen at the *Lak Muang* shrine, and only 2 of them.

Pho Bamphen has once complained about the dances of young girls instead of the traditional dancing by men. He said that the officials from Bangkok like to see girls. That is why they organize the procession that way.

The Municipal councilors themselves have been in conflict with the Governor. The Municipality provides men and money, while the Governor and town officials simply give orders.

Thus we can see attempts on the part of the bureaucrats, including the Governor and officials, to take away Bun Bang-Fai from the communities, the *khum*, and make them their own. In this process, they are using their authority to make changes without any real understanding of the original process and meaning of the ritual and the ceremony. All of this take-over and change are carried out in the name of “tourism promotion”, whether it be only a pretext or a sincere belief.

## **B. Tourism and Culture: Some Observations That May Be Drawn from Bun Bang-Fai**

From this study of Bun Bang-Fai, it can be seen that culture will continually change as the society and the beliefs of the people change. Tourism may be just one factor contributing to change. Tourism in itself neither harms nor helps the culture. It is how we deal with it that matters.

If we are willing to do everything to our culture—modifying, changing it, making it falsely more spectacular in order to attract tourists—then we would damage our culture. We would be prostituting ourselves and selling our culture for money from tourists’ pockets.

From this study, it would seem that the educated officials of the towns are often more willing to do this than the *khum* people are. This is interesting for it shows that Bangkok-trained officials have little appreciation for local cultures. They do not have a true understanding of the local culture where they work. The roots of the problem may be in our education system, for we often find local people, who have been through university education in Bangkok, to be of the same attitude towards their own culture.

This study also sheds light on ways by which we may make tourism beneficial and favorable to the preservation of our local cultures. When cultural items are selected to become tourist attractions at the national level, it gives much pride to the local population. All people in Yasothon, especially the *khum* people, are very proud that their festival has been selected as a national tourist attraction.

Thus, we can see that tourism can be made an instrument for the preservation of valuable cultural items. To be able to do so it is important that we must not change our culture to suit the taste and liking of the tourists. Instead, we must train the tourists to appreciate our culture and help to preserve it. Then we would not be selling ourselves like prostitutes to be looked down upon with contempt. We would exhibit our valuable cultural items for others to come and admire.

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