An Adaptation of Traditional Beliefs to Buddhism: A Study of Lan Xang Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to study the adaptation of the Tai-Lao people's traditional beliefs to Buddhism. The study is based on 5 important Lan Xang literary works, namely Khun Bourom, Thao Ba Jueng, Phaya Khankhak, Khu Lu-Nang Oua and Pha Daeng-Nang Ai.

The result of the study reveals that these works are traditionally oral tales of the Tai-Laos people, which were composed in written form only after the reign of King Vixul of the Lan Xang Kingdom (A.D.1500-1520). It is supposed that most of the poet authors were Buddhist monks and these literary works are mainly read to audiences during Buddhist ceremonies and feasts.

In the process of re-creating these oral tales into written forms, some episodes and significant characters have been transformed to accommodate to Buddhism. Thus, it may be concluded that these myths and tales are adapted and 'transformed' into Buddhist literature.
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This article aims to analyze the adaptation of the traditional beliefs of the Tai-Lao people to Buddhism. The study is based on five Lan Xang literary works namely: Khun Bourom, Thao Ba Jueng, Pha Daeng-Nang Ai, Khu Lu-Nang Oua and Phaya Khankhak.

These literary works are believed to be traditional oral tales of the Thai-Lao people. They were only composed in written form in the reign of King Vixul (B.E.2043-2063) and reached their highest popularity in the reign of King Suriyawongsa (B.E.2176-2233).

The 5 literary works are as follows:

1. Khun Bourom composed from a longstanding oral tradition. The first text in written form was found in the reign of King Vixul (2046 B.E.) It was written by Pra Maha Thep Luang and Pra Maha Mongkhol Siddhi.

Existing in palm leaves, the text was written in both Dham and Thai Noi scripts. The former (Dham) was in prose such as Pong Saowadan Lan Xang or Lan Xang Chronicles. The latter (Thai Noi) was in verse such as Nithan Khun Bourom or Khun Borom.

This is a creation myth about the ancestors of the Tai people. The story focuses on Khun Bourom, the legendary king.

2. Thao Ba Jueng or Thao Hoong Thao Jueng, an epic believed to be composed in written form around B.E.2000-2050. This ancient epic was written in verse on palm leaves in the Thai Noi script.

The epic describes the story of Thao Ba Jueng who was great king and hero of all the Tai people.
3. **Pha Daeng-Nang Ai**, a traditional romance of Pha Daeng, Nang Ai and Bhangkee, believed to refer to the legend of the wars between various tribes in the Mae Khong river region at the time the Khmer Kingdom was at its highest glory. This romance was written on palm leaves in Thai Noi script. Formerly, it was read at funerals.

4. **Khu Lu-Nang Oua**, a romantic tale about the tragedy of Khu Lu and Nang Oua who sacrificed their lives for their great love.

   This work was written on palm leaves in Dham script.

5. **Phaya Khankhak** a myth about the ideal king, the text of which is recited during the ritual of rain-seeking Rocket festival (Boon Bang Fai).

   This work was written on palm leaves in Thai Noi script.

**Buddhism in the Lan Xang Kingdom**

The Lao people in ancient times worshipped the spirits in the heavens and practiced the cult of their ancestors. According to written evidence, Buddhism only started to be officially influential in Lan Xang kingdom in the reign of King Fa Ngum (B.E.1846-1915). *(Viravong: 1964: 36-37)* Queen Nang Kae Keng Ya, the daughter of the Khmer King requested her husband to introduce Buddhism into the Lao Kingdom. The Khmer King, father-in-law of King Fa Ngum, sent Phra Maha Pasaman, King Fa Ngum’s own tutor, and Phra Maha Thep Luang, together with 4 Buddhist Monks and 3 other experts, to preach Buddhism in the Lao Kingdom. At the same time, Phra Bang, a gold Buddha statue, was brought along, together with the Tipitaka, engineers, and craftsmen.

Buddhism reached prominence in the reign of King Vixul (B.E.2043-2063). There were many Buddhist scholars, and there was a translation of the Tipitaka as well as the compilation of the legends of Khun Bourom during that period.

In the year 2066 B.E. King Bhotisarnraj sent an ambassadorial mission to Chiangmai to ask for the Buddhist Tipitaka as well as monk teachers. Phra Muang Kes Klao, the King of Chiangmai, offered the mission 60 Tipitaka sets together with Phra Mongkhol Thera and several other monks.
In B.E.2076, King Bhotisarnraj established Buddhism as the official religion of the kingdom replacing the traditional belief of animism. (phi fah, phi-thaen) He issued a royal decree ordering his people to give up the worship of spirits and subsequently, the shrines, altars and other structures built for any such worship were destroyed, and Buddhist temples and shrines were built in their place, such as Wat Sawankhalok.

The Trace of Traditional Beliefs in Lan Xang Literature

The literature of Lan Xang in written form started after Buddhism was established as the official religion in the reign of King Vixul when the Chief Monk Phra Maha Thep Luang and Phra Maha Mongkhol Siddhi compiled the legends of Khun Bourom.

The manuscripts were derived from the Buddhist Texts. At first, they were written in Dham script and in prose form, for religious instruction. The first works written in Dham were Champa Si Ton, Buddhassen and Us aparot (Phimmason:1959 :343) These prose works were, therefore, of earlier date than the literary texts in verse in their transcription into Laotian script(Thai Noi).The Laotian script is thought to have been for more everyday use. They are Karaked, Lin Thong, Taeng On, Surivong etc.,

The reign of King Suriya Vongsa (B.E. 2176-2233) was the Golden Era of Lan Xang Literature. There were many authors and poets who produced valuable literature,such as Sin Sai, Pu Son Lhan, Lhan Son Pu, Khulu-Nang Oua, Pha Daeng- Nang Ai, Surivong, Karaked, Seaw Sawad, Nang Taeng Oon,Khun Thueg (Latanawong:1989:18)

Yet, there is a corpus of literature that reflects the traditional beliefs of the kingdom before the arrival of Buddhism. These are the traditional popular tales. Some are connected with the history of the nation like Thao Ba Jueng (Thao Hoong-Thao Jueng), Khun Bourom. Some are connected with the rituals still in practice like Phaya Khankhak, Pha Daeng-Nang Ai. Although these tales were written down in later days, the main plots have not been changed and we can see various traces of traditional beliefs.
1. The Belief in Thaen

Thaen is the name of a traditional god of the Tai people, the greatest god in heaven whose celestial abode exists at the furthest point North. It is believed that in the old days Thaen and human beings could communicate but later when human beings created too much trouble for Thaen, lines of communication were cut.

Thaen appears in various roles in Lan Xang literature as the Creator-God, a lesser god, the Ancestor-God and the City-god.

Thaen as Creator-God

In this aspect he was called “Thaen, Phaya Thaen, Thaen Luang fah Khuen, Thaen fah and Thaen Luang fah Tor”

Thaen is the king of heaven, creator and god who brings both success and disaster.

- he punished human beings by creating floods (Pong Sawadan Lan Xang, Khun Borom)
- gave rain (Phaya Khankhak, Khu Lu-Nang Oua)
- gave rulers (Pong Sawadan Lan Xang, Khun Bourom)
- caused victory (Thao Hoong-Thao Jueng, Thao Yi Ba Jueng)
- gave spouses (Thao Hoong-Thao Jueng, Khu Lu-Nang Oua)

Thaen can be communicated with through spirit medium and sacrifice rites. The sacrifice used in all rites were buffalo legs.

Thaen as a lesser-god

They are the followers of Thaen Luang, named “Thaen Taeng, Thaen Kom, Thaen Tra, Thaen Pan, Thaen Fa Fak Sawon, Thaen She, Thaen Sew”.

Thaen Taeng - god who teaches how to grow crops, weave cloth and use plants as medicine (Pong Saowadan Lan Xang).

Thaen Pan - god of dance (Pong Saowadan Lan Xang)

Thaen Fa Fak Sawan - celestial gods who protect the earth-
Thaen Kom (Pongsawadan Lan Xang)
Thaen Xang (Khun Bourom)
Thaen Hoo He (Khun Bourom)
Thaen She, Thaen Sew - gods who bore Nam Tao Pung who created the Tai and Lao

**Thaen as the Ancestor-god**

*Thaen Yai, Mae Ya Ngam, Thaen Lai* (Khun Burom) were the ancestors of Tai-Lao who were good people and were venerated after their death as guardian deities of the kingdom. They were ancestors who sacrificed themselves in cutting down kheua khao kat, the gigantic and harmful liana which links the earth to the sky. This liana had grown so vast, covered their town so completely, that it blocked out the sun. The couple were crushed to death when the giant vine collapsed.

**Thaen as the City-god**

They are the ruler spirit followers of Thaen Luang such as *Thaen Lom of Bhuji, Thaen Chang of Muang Lian Phan, Thaen Lom of Kong Tunn, Thaen Nguang of Kamma* (Thao Hoong-Thao Jueng) *Thaen Lo, Than Lho Thaen Tue* (Thao Yi Ba Jueng) *Thaen Lo, Thaen Lho, Thaen Lerng* (Phaya Khankhak). They might be the leaders of northern territories close to Muang Man. In reality, they might be the former ruler who was later eulogized as the guardian spirit of the city such as Thaen Lo.

2. **The Belief in spirits**

The Tai people believe that the spirit exists even after one dies. So if the spirits are properly worshipped, they would endow the person with all kinds of benevolence. Therefore, the Tai people worship the spirits of their ancestors, believing that those spirits would look after and protect them.

These were called *Phi Dum, Phi Chua* (Phi Sua) *Sua Muang, Phi Poo-Ya*. The foremost spirits who were praised as the guardians of the city were called *Mahesak Lak Muang, Phi Muang Kam Poo, Ta Nai Kua Muang* (Khu Lu-Nang Oua) *Phi Muang Ya Ngam* (Thao Ba Jueng).

These traditional beliefs were deeply held in Tai-Lao Society. These were found not only in literature but were also expressed in annual rituals.
The Adaptation of traditional beliefs to Buddhism: a study of literature

In five Lan Xang literary works composed after Buddhism was officially established, we can see the adaptation of traditional beliefs to Buddhist ideas. The adaptation makes it possible for the traditional legends to exist without conflict with the concept of Buddhism.

The techniques employed to adapt traditional tales to Buddhist beliefs are various.

1) The technique of narration

1.1 In historical tales and legends, the poet incorporates Buddhist ideas in some episodes and characters, such as in *Pha Daeng-Nang Ai*, at the end of the story. Bhangkhee would know Nang Ai as a spouse in the future when Sri Ariyamettaya becomes the fifth Buddha. Bhangkhee’s death represented the result of Nang Ai’s revenge from a former life. This is in accordance with the concept of karma in Buddhism.

In *Khun Borom*, Thaen Luang was Indra while Thaen Taeng was Phisanukarm and the Four Thaen were Thao Jatulokaban in Buddhism.

1.2 In romantic tales, the poet claims that the stories are from the Jataka tales.

In all the narrations, the story starts with the conventional homage to the teachers, the Three Gems and the god Indra.

2) The technique of adapting the role of some characters to Buddhism

2.1 *giving more importance to the role of Indra*

Indra is a Buddhist god who is the ruler of Davadingsa Heaven. Indra gains his status from his merit earned while being a human being on earth. In the 5 literary works studied, we find that Indra has taken the place of Thaen as the most important God. Yet Indra is different from Thaen in the sense that Indra acts as an intermediary who helps to reconcile rather than to bestow good or bad results. He is the protector of pious men. He is good benevolent and just and causes order and peace to reign over the world. Besides, Indra will never punish human beings and is without prejudice like Thaen.
When human beings ask for Thaen’s help, they have to perform sacrificial rites. In *Khu Lu-Nang Oua* - Nang Aua’s mather consulted the oracles by performing a rite. (Long Khuang Siang Naen) She had to prepare 3 sets of trays for Indra, Mahesak and Thaen.

Long Khuang Siang Naen is the ancient ritual which gave Indra more importance. The tray of offerings for Indra was given prominence and treated differently from the others. For Indra one brought flowers, jost stick candles and eight offerings while one used buffalo’s legs, chicken and alcohol for other spirits.

In *Thao Ba Jueng*, when Thao Ba Jueng became a spirit, he fought with Thaen Man Ta Tok and won the battle. Indra became involved as a mediator.

In *Phaya Khankhak* - Indra supported Phaya Khankhak in an attempt to build his castle and to take Nang Kaew from Uttara Kuru Thaweep as his wife. He also offered assistants and magic weapons for his use.

In *Pha Daeng-Nang Ai* - when the 2 nagas fought each other, Indra appointed Vessukarma to become the peace-keeper and teach them Dhamma.

2.2 *Diminishing the role of Thaen*

Thaen's role as the most powerful creator god is diminished to that of giving rain to earth and looking after Naen Garden, where one finds a pond with blossoms whose intertwined roots indicate the fate of human beings.

3. The Technique of creating the main character according to the Buddhist ideal

The main character, especially the hero in Buddhist literature, is created according to the Buddhist ideal of morality and merit. In the 5 texts studied we also find that the poet tries to create the hero in the Buddhist way by claiming that the hero is, in fact, a Bodhisatava.

For example, *Phaya Khankhak*, the ideal of a Buddhist king who rules or even fights a war in order to teach Dhamma.
4. The adaptation of Buddhism in the theme

4.1 *The kings from heaven*

The traditional belief states that kings are Thaen's sons coming down from heaven to rule. The poet adjusts this belief by making the kings Indra's sons or Bodhisatavas.

In *Phaya Khankhak*, Phaya Khankhak was a Bodhisatava who came into this world to be the Emperor of Dhamma. When he was born, he was given a glass castle and a wife by Indra. Chak Kaew was given to him by Chatulokaban. Seven precious jugs were given by 'Phaya Naga'. Immortal Rice, Silver and gold were given to him by Phaya Garuda. He taught his people Dhamma and persuaded them to practice the five and eight precepts of the Buddha. When he won the war with Thaen, he announced that his fight was not meant to rule over Thaen, but to teach him Dhamma. Therefore, Phaya Khankhak is an ideal ruler in contrast to Thaen who is a tyrant.

4.2 *The marriage is made in heaven by Thaen*

The poets adjust the traditional belief that Thaen is the one who dictates the marriage of human beings through the blossoms in Naen Garden to the Buddhist ideas that the marriage is dictated by the Law of Karma.

In *Khu Lu-Nang Oua*, Karma in the past life was the cause of the seperation of the lovers.

In *Pha Daeng-Nang Ai* - Bhangkee and Nang Ai were a couple in a past life. However, when Bhangkee left her, she cursed him to take revenge when they were reborn again.

The traditional belief as to marriage was replaced by the Law of Karma in the late period Lan Xang Literature.

**Conclusion**

In the Tai-Lao community, literature plays an important role as a didactic devise. The monks will read to laymen in merit-making ceremonies and other traditional festivals. These texts will later on be sung and performed by the folk singers to a wider public. It is interesting, therefore, to observe the wisdom of the poets in adapting
traditional beliefs to Buddhism in order to preserve the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the community. At the same time, in making the adaptation, they were able to appeal to and maintain the interest of a public whose worldview was shifting from a belief in spirits and gods to one based on the teachings of the Buddha.
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