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Rethinking Mekong Ritual Knowledge

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The debate over how local riparian people perceive their riverscape, and the way their local ecological knowledge is cognitively organized and purposefully expressed, is playing an increasingly important role in natural resource management. As Victor Turner has proposed, religious beliefs and practices are more than simply ‘grotesque’ reflections of economic, political, and social relationships; rather they constitute decisive keys to understanding how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate. Unfortunately, the ethnographic methodologies and conceptualizations employed to understand those cognitive and cultural aspects of local Mekong riparian people have been, to date, very limited and rather static.

We often see research agendas, especially those being aimed at political advocacy for community resource rights and control, attempting to depict the resilience of local livelihood by portraying the ‘cultural legitimacy’ of a community through the practices of rituals and ceremonies concerning traditional beliefs about the supernatural world. An assumption often made among scholars is that local people deploy ritualistic practices to express knowledge and worldview toward their environment. Some even go further as to argue for pragmatic regulatory function of those rituals in community resource management. The presupposition for these conclusions is that local riparian people are cognizant of their ritual account—the background, significance and process—so that the ritual itself can be used as an effective implement in community resource management. In other word, those researchers maintain that local people are well aware of, and have a meta-understanding of, the rituals they perform regardless of rapid social and economic transformation in their communities and the changes in local living styles.

Many studies concerning water-based rituals in Northeastern Thailand (Isan), especially those produced by cultural anthropologists, folklorists and community activists, still describe the strong ties between the traditional aspects of rituals and their practitioners. Examples range from the case of Bun Bangfai-rainmaking rite, to the worship of rain god Thaen, or even the mythical and symbolism of the water serpent Naga. Sumet Jumsai, for example, in his description of Bangfai—a rocket made of bamboo with essential decorative symbols of Naga, interprets the Naga projectile in the Bangfai festival by tracing back to the original serpent-cloud releasing the water of life and as such connects it to the fertility of life on earth. In addition, there are at least two important regional myths that have been presumed by anthropologists and folklorists to depict human-nature relations of Isan people and which have recently been comprehensively translated into English publications. One is Phadaeng Nang Ai and the other is Phya Khunhaek, both by Wajuppa Tossa. The Phadaeng Nang Ai, probably the first of Thai-Isan folk tale ever translated into English verse, deals throughout with the explanation of regional geography, local place-naming, and more importantly the interpretation of multi-layered relations between humans and the nature asserted by the beliefs in Buddhist doctrine and cosmology. Wajuppa claims that Phadaeng Nang Ai continues to be a cultural force in Isan tradition as it is still told and performed annually at the firing-rocket-festival Bun Bangfai festivals as well as recited during other occasions throughout the year. Stanley Tambiah, in his structural analysis of the Phadaeng Nang Ai myth, concludes that while the plot of the myth overtly asserts an 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. For Tambiah, the Phadaeng Nang Ai myth portrays what he called the 'balance equation between naturalization of human society and the humanization of nature'.

Another folk tale about water is the myth of Isan fertility, Phya Khonkhao or the Toad King. Wajuppa sums up in her introduction to the translation of Phya Khonkhao that it is the story of a toad-like hero who succeeds in a revolt against the rain god who refuses to send rain to earth. She further connects the story with the beliefs Isan people have regarding natural catastrophes and the way they cope with such phenomenon, especially floods and drought, through different ceremonies concerning spiritual practices performed throughout the year. The myth itself, Wajuppa claims, is more than mere entertainment; it carries important meanings for the Isan people. The story shows the triumph of a human over a god, and thereby helps powerless people maintain hope in their lives, hope that some day they may be able to overcome their burdens.

The question is whether local people still have an in-depth understanding of the essence of such rituals and supernatural myths concerning rain and water management. The fact is that local people may be able to recount some of the names and conditions involved in performing the rite, but overall they lack a competent command of the ritual practice as a whole, thereby limiting the importance of the ritual in daily practice for resource management strategy. This means researchers must also reconsider the validity of portraying traditional ritual as a medium for expressing local ecological knowledge.

This sort of research supposition has limited our understanding of contemporary change in the relation between communities and their water resources. Postulating such simplifications - i.e. strong and unquestioned relations between a community's practice of rituals and their resilience concerning natural resources - does not adequately account for cultural changes within a community. Moreover, the uncritical promotion of traditional understanding and ideological ties among ritual practitioners toward the rituals being practiced underestimate the external socioeconomic forces that have come to permeate communities through migration and regional development.

Through a case study at Ban Na Wang, a typical Mekong riparian community in Ubon Ratchathani province in northeastern Thailand, I have found that most of the religious rituals, be they Buddhist-based or the traditional folk ones, have changed from their original form. Today they are shaped extensively by economic considerations and a more capitalist mentality among community members. If we view contemporary rituals and their mythological bases as 'movements' in which they are substantial but not static, and capable of transformation in the Carl Jung/Carl Kerényi sense, we could then seek to analyze how those rituals and beliefs have changed and by what factors, instead of trying to narrate them as a traditional meaning that is rather fixed and conclusive. It is undeniable that with a more center-oriented migration pattern occurring throughout the Isan region as well as the domination of cultural and economic influences brought about by state development projects, the fundamental understanding of local mythology and associated ritualistic practices are being discarded as obsolete.

If, in order to better understand the state of knowledge in the Mekong region, ritual knowledge and practices pertaining local ecological knowledge are to be collected, interpreted, and analyzed through active ethnographic research, then we must go beyond simply assuming strong and unshakable ties between community and their ritual practices that signify local ecological resilience. We need to conceptualize a locality dynamically, not as a fixed entity with traditional narratives, especially if our aim is to serve as advocates for community campaigns over resource management and impact assessment using cultural and cognitive indications. Mary Douglas was right in proposing that in order not to select arbitrarily, not to be unfair to the market, not to import political bias, not to be too kind with religious ideas, our model of society needs to be able to organize a rich store of information, be flexible, and dynamic, and thereby capable of incorporating change. It is time for researchers of the Mekong region to make the debate over community resource management through ritual a more realistic one.

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