

### Part III: The Origin of Songkran



"Do you know the meaning of throwing water at each other?" This is a question frequently asked by outsiders participating in Songkran each year. To provide a complete answer for this question, the meaning and origin of Songkran must be explained.

Songkran is the traditional New Year Festival of Tai ethnic groups. It falls in mid-April annually. Songkran in Sanskrit means a move, in reference to the significant movement of the sun into the sign of Aries, leading into a New Year. In ancient astrology, Aries is the first sign of the zodiac in relation to the solar circulation. When the sun moves to Aries, or mid-April, it signifies the change of the year. Thus, the New Year starts.

Songkran is thus, a celebration of the end of the year and the beginning of a New Year. It occurs during the warmest time of each year when the sun shines strongly above the head. The blessing is traditionally made by pouring or sprinkling fragrant water on each other. Water will convey the blessing to others as well as to help ease the heat of the sharp bright days. "Rod Num Dum Hua" referring to gently bathing the elderly and asking for the blessing is also practiced during this time of year. This ceremony clearly demonstrates the character of the Tai, which is paying respect to the elderly and their ancestors. Today, the gentle and elegant manners seem to have disappeared during the Songkran festival. People have changed their conduct and have become more aggressive. They tend to be concerned more about enjoyment than the fundamental purpose of the blessing Songkran as founded by their ancestors.

In Luang Prabang the Songkran festival lasts approximately 10 days, from April 10-19:

The celebration of Songkran starts with the election of Nang Sang Khan (Miss Luang Prabang) on April 10-12. Those who participate in the beauty pageant are pretty young girls from Luang Prabang. This is originated from the Hindu mythology told and retold from generation to generation as follows:

Once upon a time there lived a good and rich man, who found no happiness in his life. What he lacked was a child of his own to whom he would like to give all his property.

He then worshipped the solar and lunar gods, and asked for an heir. The gods told the story to Indra, the king of gods (in Hindu and Buddhist mythology). Indra realized what a good man he was, and wanted to help him. He thus allowed Dhammabal Dhevabutra to

be born into the rich man's family. The celestial boy was blessed to understand animal languages.

When the boy grew up, he became a very intelligent young man. One day he met Kabilaphroma, a great god with a four-faced head. The god was well respected by all men for his omniscience. He was also renowned for his riddles. He liked to pose a riddle for people. Those who could not give him the right answer would be beheaded.

"Young man, where does the soul rest in the morning, where at noon and where at night?" He asked Dhammabal who had seven days to find the answer. If he could provide the god with the correct answer, Kabilaphroma would worship him with his four-faced head. But if the man should fail in this challenge, he would be beheaded.

Dhammabal could not think of any answer to this riddle even until the sixth night. Trying very hard to find out the answer before the sun rose, he heard a pair of eagles talking to each other. "What shall we eat tomorrow?", asked the female eagle. "We will feed on Dhammabal's flesh. The young man will not be able to give the answer to Kabilaphroma, and will be beheaded, said the male one. "Do you know the right answer to that riddle?" asked the female. "The soul rests in the face in the morning, the chest at noon, and the feet at night. That is why all men wash their faces in the morning, spray fragrant water on their chests at noon to ease the heat, and wash their feet at night" answered the male.

The following morning Dhammabal headed forward to see Kabilaphroma, and told him the answer. After listening to the young man, the god praised him for his wisdom, and kept his promise. He called his seven daughters to take his head to the wise young man. But since he was a very powerful god, his head would cause enormous damage to the

world if kept on earth. If it fell to the ground, all the world would burn. If submerged in the river, all the waters would boil. If thrown into the air, all the atmosphere would be swept into strong winds which would destroy everything on earth. He then told Dhammabal to place his head on the golden platter, and told his daughters to keep this in a cave on Mount Meru<sup>1</sup>, in the celestial world. Since then, every year on Songkran the seven daughters parade their father's head around Mount Meru. Each of them would take turns to lead this heavenly procession. The other gods on Mount Meru would pour water on the head as a means of paying homage to the great Kabliaphroma, and to keep the world at peace.

The world imitates this celestial ceremony. The Royal Court's Brahman astrologers calculate the movement of the sun and the moon, and announce the official Songkran days. In Luang Prabang the girl who won the beauty pageant will be crowned as Miss Luang Prabang. She will also act as Nang Sang Khan, referring to one of the seven Goddesses who takes turns to lead the parade around Mount Meru each year. There are meanings attached to the annual Goddess in her costume, the jewelry and flowers she is wearing, the diet she is supposed to eat, the weapon she is carrying, and the animal she uses for transportation. The other predictions attached to the annual Goddess include the harvest, the rainfall in the terrestrial and celestial worlds, as well as the auspicious days of the week.

<sup>1</sup>In Hindu mythology, the universe is composed of Jambudvipa as a central continent and Mount Meru as its centre. This continent is circled by six concentric rings of land, which are separated by seven oceans. At the summit of Mount Meru is the realm of Indra, the king of gods, which is surrounded by the eight guardians of the cardinal points (Coedes 1970; 38-53)