

# Rituals in Thai Society : The Reflection of Diversity of Beliefs

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**Abstract.** Rituals are things that man created according to their beliefs as a tool of communication between the abstracts and the supernatural beings. In a multicultural society, there are varieties of customs and rituals that arose from different beliefs. Thai people have a mixture of beliefs. These different kinds of beliefs have different roles and are expressed through different kinds of symbols. The beliefs in Thai society led to different customs are partly belonged to the local belief of the supernatural. Part of the rituals derived from the belief in Buddhism and Brahmanism that came in to Thailand at different point in time, it merged with former beliefs and thus, became unique custom of Thailand. This study aims to 1) Find the concept concerning rituals and the beliefs of supernatural beings and 2) Study the beliefs as source of rituals in Thailand. A qualitative method is used in this study, and the results are presented in a form of descriptive analysis.

*Keywords: Rituals, beliefs, Thai Society, diversity, tradition*

## Introduction

Rituals have a role as a tool for communication of human beings. In other words, rituals are created according to a belief as tool of communication to the supernatural beings manifested in forms of supernatural powers of the guardians spirits such as Phra Phum (house spirits) and Chao Ti (spirit guarding an area), as well as guarding against evil power of the evil spirits. There are various ways of communications and each differs in each area. In some cases, the ritual allows individuals to communicate with the supernatural world directly while in some cases, the medium need to have some sort of special characteristics: such as having higher mind power than normal people, received mysterious skills, were chosen by the gods, or have special status comparing to normal people (for example the Brahmans or priests of certain religion).

Going through life, human beings always have some kind of belief even if they know it or not. Belief is a kind of mental culture owned by human beings that has evolved over time along

with other kind of thoughts. The belief in supernatural beings is put on entities such as gods, spirits, and sacred beings. The beliefs also evolve according to certain eras; for instance, there were period when people believed in natural spirits such as spirits of the forest, mountains, and other kinds of gods. Later on, there were also beliefs concerning the ancestral spirits, the belief in multiple gods, and the belief in one true god. Currently, it is interesting to see how humans also believe in science and technology resulted from human creativity.

Rituals and beliefs became a culture of thinking responsible in controlling the direction of the society and social norms by not permitting any kind of action that affect the society. In traditional society whose governing law is absence, traditions are very important. The wrong doers will be severely punished. In modern society guided by governing laws, some traditions are still important. Apart from the fact that beliefs created traditions, they also create customs. In other words, custom is things that have been practiced continuously until they are accepted by the majority and became the

customs of the societies that have clear regulations such as marriage, births, funerals, and costumes. If the regulations are not followed, one can assumed to not know the real customs and might be blamed by the society. Therefore, after the belief is formed, rituals for both in the individual level and the social level are created.

The presentation of rituals in Thai society and the integration of different kinds of beliefs will focus on the concept of the rituals and beliefs more than providing the detail of various kinds of beliefs and rituals existed in Thai society. This kind of presentation aim to provide the readers a direction to study and understand the characteristics of the rituals and beliefs in Thai society.

From those background and reasons, I assume that the study regarding rituals and beliefs in Thailand, which is a part of Southeast Asia, will provide important basic information in terms of rituals and beliefs as the source of rituals in Thailand. Such information will provide methods of preserving and improving the cultural heritage, originated from various beliefs applied and created to fit beliefs with other areas in ASEAN community.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To study concepts concerning the rituals and the beliefs of the supernatural beings.
2. To study the beliefs which are the source of rituals in Thailand.

### **Research Methodology**

The qualitative method is used in this study. The researchers gathered information from documents and research related to rituals and beliefs, then analyzed and synthesized for the principles of ritual and belief. Analysis of the content is carried out by employing Cultural Diffusion Theory, Cultural Assimilation Theory, and Cultural Changes. The presentation of the data is done through descriptive analysis method.

### **Results**

#### **Rituals as A Tool of communication to Supernatural Beings**

Rituals mean tool or method that human beings created according to the beliefs to communicate to the things that they believe in, both directly and indirectly, to grant their wishes. Rituals are performed according to the

belief that didn't have any connection to the supernatural being. It is a form of preparation, a starting point, and the symbol of an initiative of some kind. It is also a meeting point, a method to create unity and bring about the participation of the people who have the same kind of belief.

As for the method in communicating or contacting the supernatural, it was suggested that there are 12 ways altogether: 1) Praying. Praying can be done as an individual or as a group. Some religions have a specific written prayer for each ritual. 2) Singing. Singing or dancing or playing musical instrument to please the sacred beings. 3) Using hallucinogens or self-inflicted pain to reach the spirituality or the sacred being. 4) Preaching. Some religion believes that when priests preach the teaching to the believers, the gods or the sacred being come upon the priests. Listening to the preaching is the same as listening to the gods themselves. 5) Keeping the precepts or strictly following the religious regulations will result in a purified soul which is pleasing to the sacred beings. 6) Using magic or chanting. 7) Using charms. 8) Celebrating; such as join a mass in Christianity. 9) Sacrifices using either food or animal. 10) Coming together to do the ceremony. 11) Seances 12) Using symbols such as images, coins, or string beads to put around the neck to give more confidence and the feeling of closeness to the sacred being (SantasombatYos, 2544 : 232). The rituals mentioned above are ways to express the relationship between men and the supernatural beings and creating the attraction to the beliefs and the fear of the supernatural.

From what was mentioned earlier, rituals are one of the way to get what we want by following the faith. Rituals are therefore the tools of faith in ceremonies by bringing together different materials to create symbols, words, actions, and for some, even music, to communicate to the supernatural that are being respected. It is also a media that express the mental status while the rituals are being performed. The rituals have both individuals and social or of a group from different beliefs or people being looked up to in the communities.

#### **Belief as A Source of Ritual**

Looking at the meaning in an analytical aspect of the concept of belief, a belief is an acceptance of the proposal or a message that those things exist by 1) accepting the truth and the false of the situations. 2) Accepting what should and shouldn't be done and 3) accepting the value of things. However, eventually, the

reason behind the support of all 3 characteristics is not as important as the beliefs and faith for those things. Therefore. The characteristics of the beliefs are rational whether provable or not. However, in order to go along with the livelihood of the people in this age of reason, we can see that there are demands for the beliefs to be rational, which seems to be a conflict within itself.

As for the beliefs that will be presented here are the beliefs in the supernatural or the acceptance of the status and power of the supernatural beings which exist in every society. This is called animism and natural worship. The supernatural beings can be classified into two following groups: the gods and the spirits. These has not human-origin or the ghost or spirits of the people who pass away. (SantasombatYos,2001 : 227)

In the development of the belief in the supernatural, it can be classified into 1) human beings have always have a belief in specific things in nature until it got expanded to all nature in the world by believing that there are spirits in all nature. 2) the belief that each of these spirits has different power. Some spirits can grant good thing and happiness to human beings while some spirits will release suffering to mankind. Three spirits exist in some forms that cannot be seen. 3) Through the belief that these spirits exist in some forms but cannot be seen, human started to imagining in their mind how those spirits should look like; they can be called either god or spirit depending on the different beliefs. As for the development side that relates to society, there might be 4 staged to the development of these beliefs: 1) Acceptance, the basic belief that led to the practices according to the belief and eventually led to the forming of rituals and customs. 2) Cult, practicing according to the beliefs by doing all the rituals which eventually led to them becoming customs, and developed into religion. 3) Religion, the belief that accompanied faith, loyalty, the giving in of oneself to the practices of the belief until becoming an ideology for life and society and eventually became a national religion. 4) Nationalism, basing on the religious belief to create the power in expressing the love for one's own people be believing that one's people is superior than others until it became a nationalism or religious discrimination (Khamdee Duan, 2002 :20-26).

For an action to become a ritual in certain kind of beliefs, there has to be 3 components: 1) Actions that directly affect the heart; in other words, ritual leads to confidence, relieve of the worries, and raise the status of the mind

according to that specific ritual, such as in ordination, which help stabilize human emotion and preserving a feeling of happiness. 2) Actions that uses materials as symbols in order to communicate with the supernatural beings. In each ritual, it might require various kinds of objects for the rituals to move forward such as flowers, candles and incense, and etc. The objects needed for certain rituals that are different in both the detail of sizes and amounts. And 3) Actions that express the physical and verbal symbols to communicate to the supernatural. The rituals require some kind of actions to be performed such as the act of putting hands together, dancing, or using voices to make melody such as praying in different melody. Some of the components necessary for some rituals.

### **Approaches Used in the Study of Rituals and Beliefs**

For the study of the rituals, the beliefs, and the phenomenon concerning the beliefs of people within different society can be seen in many forms of rituals, mostly consist of the following concepts: 1) Animism which is based on the belief that the belief and the rituals are things that can respond to the energy or power form the spirits who have higher power than nature and exist through phenomenon 2) the concept of Relativism. This concept is based on the principle that the belief and rituals done towards one thing will affect another thing either directly or indirectly. This concept led to the construction of the objects use in the rituals that express the things people hope for. 3) Dynamism, the beliefs are based on the belief that both the belief and the rituals can adjust themselves according to the way of life of the people and the modern society. The power of the sacred objects that came from the belief and eventually create a new kind of ritual. The form of the beliefs and rituals with the societies also change according to the changes in the economy and governing system.

### **Beliefs as Source of Rituals in Thailand Rituals in Thailand**

Due to the fact that Thai society composed of people with different set of beliefs, there are varieties of rituals within Thai society. For the rituals that came from some Thai customs cannot be concluded directly that they derived directly from the supernatural beings but some of the rituals came from the observations and the analysis of the natural phenomenon that had

been adjusted and practice until they became customs.

The rituals in Thailand can be categorized into rituals about life and rituals according to the calendar.

Rituals about life mean the rituals that are done in every part of life such as when a child is born, there will be a ritual to come up with the child's name, when a child is a little bit older, there will also be a ceremony for cutting off the hair in transitioning period into teenagers and from teenagers to adulthood. Additionally, the ceremony will also be done when certain status in life change such as weddings or ordinations as well as the funerals after someone passes away. It can be concluded that these rituals have to do with life since birth until death, depending on which ones you want to give more importance to. The main rituals are the rituals that related to the religions that one holds since childhood. When a man reached 20 years of age, a ritual of ordination will be held. Men will never be men if they hadn't gone through this ceremony. After the ordination, they are expected to start a family to become a perfect adult. In other words, they had gone through a lot of mental training, able to differentiate between right and wrong where the goal of that is the wedding. These are some examples of the rituals that happened during the important moments of Buddhist Thai men.

Rituals according to the calendar was a ritual that is in rotation with specific timing. It is true that rituals are important to the way of life of Thai people since it has to do with the abundant of the crops in the fields which is related to the Buddhist beliefs and the beliefs on the gods and spirits. Some were also rituals that aimed at bringing about good luck and entertainment of the member of the society.

The rituals according to the calendar that has clear evidence was the 12 months ritual which Thai people are very familiar with; especially the rituals that are being practiced in all region of the country such as Songkran, the start of Buddhist Lent, the end of Buddhist Lent, TodKatin ceremony, or Loy Krathong ceremony.

According to the 12 month ritual of Thai people, they can be categorized into rituals practiced within the palace and rituals practiced amongst the common people. Rituals that are practiced amongst the common people are call 12 month rituals. It can be seen that the rituals of the Isaan people go along with the rituals that Thai people in other province are practicing, and might even be similar to the royal 12 month ceremony (Heed Sibsong in Thai). However,

these rituals also have a lot of detail and many steps in conducting the rituals. Those who aim to study need to study from the textbooks about these rituals and related documents.

### **Religious Rituals in Thai Society**

Religious ritual means the components of the rituals from the religious beliefs that reflect the lives of the people according to the religious teachings as well as reflecting the meanings and values of each of the items. It is a way to express the relationship between believers and the sacred things within the religion and the highest goal of the religion. Therefore. Religious rituals can be adjusted and changed according to the time. Religious rituals within Thai society mostly concerns with Buddhism due to the fact that it is the religion practiced the most by Thai people. Religious rituals mean the rituals that reflect the thought, the beliefs, and the faith in Buddhism which is accompanied by the story and/or history of Buddhism. They also reflect the Buddhist way of life that are accepted by the Buddhist in those society. The rituals can be categorized into 2 types: 1) the rituals that derived directly from Buddhism and 2) the rituals that add Buddhism aspects in later on.

The rituals that came directly from Buddhism are the ritual of ordination, listening to Thet Maha Chat/Boon Pha Wet of Isaan people. Religioud holiday such as Makhabucha, Wisakabucha, Asanhabucha, and the beginning of Buddhist Lent, TodKatin ceremony, TodPha Pa ceremony. Rituals that needs to include religion in such as Songkran, Wedding, Tam Bun Baan Mai, or rituals that involve sicknesses or funeral such Aphithamachanting, Bang Su kun, and 100 days ceremony.

When society change, the practices in Thai society also change; apart from having traditional rituals or rituals that concerns the lives, the beliefs, and religions, there are also rituals that remind people of important events in the past in order to influence the feeling of nationalism and the unity of Thai people, as well as to go along with the country where most of the people are still farmers. Currently, there are also rituals that relate to agricultural produce.

### **Rituals in Thailand As Originated from Various Beliefs**

These beliefs in Thai society mentioned here mean the acceptance of the supernatural beings by some people in Thai society that is reflected by the phenomenon of part of the

people within the society give the importance and accept the supernatural beings and things that cannot be explained using science such as ghosts and spirits, sacred beings, magic, love potion, fate, auspicious, dreams, restrictions, exorcism, karma, heaven and hell, as well as all the superstition rituals. These beliefs led to rituals. The rituals in Thailand can be categorized into 7 kinds:

1) Rituals originated from religion.

Most of Thai people are Buddhist, about 94%, Islamic about 4%, Christian about 1% and Brahman - Hindu and others about 1%. Thai people have beliefs that came from religions such as the belief of Buddhist people about karma, heaven and hell, or reincarnation. In the religions that believe in the gods (Christianity, Islam and Brahman - Hindu), people will believe in the power of the gods. Religion beliefs are indicators of the important rituals within the way of life of Thai people and many traditions and customs within the society. It is also the determinant of the behavior of the member within the society.

2) Rituals originated from the belief of certain cults

Thai people also have beliefs in different cult that have not yet been classified as religions; such as the worship to the gods like Thao Maha Phrom, Shiva, Guanyin, while some beliefs is just a belief of smaller groups within the society; such as the belief in PhayaThaen in Isaan, Rama V, Jatukarm necklace pendants, as well as worshiping the local heroes. The characteristics of these beliefs are different; some have been practiced for a long time while some emerged and faded along with the changes of society.

3) Rituals originated from the beliefs of local gods such as Chao Paw, Chao Mae, or other spirits. Thai people believes in gods and spirits. Especially the belief in the gods. In the big picture, combining the belief in gods thought the country of Thailand can result in more than 100 gods. In the same way, looking deeper in Thai society,, one may also find many kinds of spirits. The gods and the spirits that lived in each location, both in nature or man-made structure, how the gods and the spirit are called are mostly based on the area that the gods and the spirits live.

4) Rituals stemmed from belief in magic and charms.

Thai people accept the power of the supernatural. The rituals can be separated into 2 types: 1) Rituals that will lead to what people

want which goes against the morality of the people and overall. There are also rituals that clearly separate the black and the white (black magic and white magic). 2) Rituals that is done to protect the people from other supernatural attack from the opponent in order to gain a happy life. The practice of the ritual is called superstition ceremony. Some of the examples would be using holy water to chase away bad luck. The practitioner will read the magic out loud. This magic is referred to as holy words and often start with "Ohm" Apart from this, there are still many kinds of magic and charms for an individual to get his/her wish while also protecting them from harm.

5) Rituals that came from astronomy, fate, dreams, and different phenomenon.

Overall, these beliefs were based on the characteristics of the person that might have something to do with the date and time of birth. Apart from this, it is also believed that the housing and the surrounding relates to the way of life. Thai people therefore believes in fate, palm reading, finding the right date for important events, or translating dreams for instance, dreaming about snakes mean you are about to find your soulmate or dreaming that you broke your teeth will lose one of the elders with the family. There are also beliefs concerning the sound of animals; when you're about to leave the house and you hear a lizard sound, that's a warning that something bad might happen.

6) Rituals stemmed from restrictions and allowances

Thai people have the belief on what they should do and what they shouldn't do; for example, don't sleep in the direction where your head is facing the west, play Mayom plant within the area of the house and you will be loved by people. These restrictions are called "Khalum" in Isaan.

7) Rituals derived from abstract things such as "kwan".

Thai people believe that we all have the spirit inside of us called "kwan". This spirit might be called differently in different area. Kwan is responsible in protecting and following us wherever we go. They also exist in non-living things as well. This kind of belief led to the Su Kwan ceremony that are practices in many events in the lives of Thai people.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Rituals are the things that men had created in each society to communicate to the

supernatural beings or the things that they believe to be sacred. It is a culture that helps calm the soul and a form of assurance in that the rituals will help us be successful and getting what we have always wanted. Rituals in Thailand came from different kind of beliefs and can be categorized into 2 types: those derived from the local superstition beliefs such as superstition beliefs, astronomical beliefs, fate, restrictions, and allowances and the belief in the abstract of things; for instant "kwan" all the way to the belief in ghost and spirits that exist in every local area of the country. Another group would be the belief that came from religions and cults that spread into Thailand.

This finding is consistent with the study of Tambiah, S.J (1988), who studied about Buddha and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand. Buddhism is the largest group within this group due to the fact that most people in the country are Buddhist. This fact supports the study of Phra Thian with Attasanto (Ochawat) (2005) about the study of Buddhist beliefs and ceremony of the shamans: case study in Bangkok. This study found that the Buddhist doctrines were applied into ceremonies as to represent the diversity of beliefs in Thailand. The rituals and beliefs of both the individuals and within the society depends on many factors such as when there are new information and new experience that contradict with the old belief, there will be a change that happen, at least in the individual level; for instance, stop believing in the things that they used to believe in and hold on to the new information when new knowledge is available such as the termination of the customs and rituals that used to be practices. These are the kind of phenomenon can be found in the current society. From what was mentioned above, when discussing about rituals with Thai society, there needs to be a discussion on the beliefs that led to the creation of those rituals as well. In the study, there needs to be a link to every aspect in order to create an overall picture or the integration such as in the study of the Katin festival, there needs to be a study on the religion belief, the format of the festival and the different methodology according to the different beliefs of each local area as well as the analysis of the changes in the economy and society that affect the changes in the meaning, the objectives, and the components of the ritual of the Katin festival. Wannasiri (Ponwatana) Niyapan(1997) explained that it was a component of cultural changes in Thailand. Therefore, the concept of performing a ritual in Thai society were influenced by the belief in spirits integrated with

the belief in Buddhism and Brahmanism; for instance, we can see that the ritual of paying respects to the three gems of Buddhism, and making merits are always done along side the rituals that are influenced by Brahmanism. Thai people likes to do ceremonies that goes along with the governments and royal ceremonies; such as the 12 month royal ceremonies are very similar to the ceremony that people practice throughout the country. This finding is consistent with the cultural diffusion that Sisantisook Somsak (2009) explained that the similar forms came from the process of diffusion. In addition, the practice of these ceremonies are also influenced by the economy and social aspect that determine the meaning and the components of the rituals that keep changing according to the eras.

### Suggestion

Apart from the study of the belief as the source of the rituals, beliefs can still be studied through various ways, such as 1) Studying about the beliefs as a source or live energy. It is a thing the push people to do or not to do something; 2) Studying about belief as a social power due to the fact that belief is the power to get people to become unified. Societies believing in the same thing will have unity. Beliefs can therefore help people reach their goals. And 3) Studying belief as a cultural power. Since beliefs are important base for the existence and the survival or many cultures with in the society. Beliefs drive culture forward in a lively and meaningful way. Beliefs can, therefore, create cultural power.

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