

# The Prabang Myths: The Sacred Narratives and their Cultural Meaning<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Prabang is a sacred Buddha image that is revered nationally by the people of Laos. The image is now located in Luang Prabang city. The Prabang plays an important part in the social, political, and cultural matters of Lao society. The Prabang is also held as a sacred symbol that expresses many of the characteristics and beliefs of the Lao people. This article aims to analyze and interpret the myths and rituals while probing their ideological basis by using a framework of symbolic and cultural interpretations.

The analysis shows that the myths and rituals associated with the Prabang image signify specific social ideologies of the Lao people. These can be divided into four points: 1) the symbol of politics and the power of the monarchy system of the Lao Kingdom; 2) the place of origin of the Prabang, which refers to the ethnic relationships of the people in Southeast Asia; 3) the characteristics and posture of the Prabang statue, which signify the power of the Kingdom's ruler; and 4) the roles related to the ideas of prosperity and fertility. This paper seeks to understand the significance of the Prabang as a symbol of sacredness, and which, in its myths and rituals, possesses hidden elements of social ideology.

## Introduction

A myth can be defined as a traditional story concerning the religious beliefs of a group of people who want to explain their history as well as the relationship between humans and the supernatural. Myths are capable of satisfying people's physical and spiritual needs. Meanings derived from the interpretation of a myth also involve the relationship between a social context and the culture that influences the way of life in a given society. Myths in all cultures also evince a sacred narrative – involving religious beliefs and rituals – in which different characters (e.g., God, a divinity, or supernatural beings) participate in defining the origin of things or rituals.<sup>2</sup> The myths of the Prabang form a sacred narrative – which has long been told to the people of Laos by their ancestors – in which the Prabang functions as a symbol that represents the Lord Buddha and, as a sacred Buddha image, gives spiritual value to Lao people. It also reflects some meanings associated with the supernatural and Buddhist beliefs as they relate to Lao society and culture.

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<sup>2</sup>Siraporn Na Thaleng, “Tale, Myth, Fantasy, Truth,” *Journal of Arts* 35, no. 2 (2006), 1

The Prabang myths that have been passed down from ancestors are aimed at expressing cultural meanings through a symbolism that binds the history of the Lao people, via a religious dialogue, to an ideological content, which, nevertheless, inspires a cultural awareness in Laos. Clifford Geertz defined a symbol as the verbal expression and action of people in a society that has been constructed for communication.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is a hidden meaning in the symbol, which may be complex and may imply an expression of opinions of people in the society. On the other hand, Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out that in interpreting and reading mythical texts, the reader must think beyond what is presented in the written text.<sup>4</sup> That is, one must analyze the complex elements of the language used because such language employs special expressions that cannot be simply interpreted as if they were part of common, everyday language. Thus, the content from the myths of Prabang can be seen as a message that expresses the ancestors' aim to inform later generations about rituals in relation to the Prabang. The myths surrounding the Prabang reflect social thought in symbolic forms, thereby conveying the thoughts, beliefs, and social emotions of Lao Buddhism. As such, they form a tool that imaginatively conveys the thoughts, beliefs, and faith of the people of Laos as well as those of Southeast Asia.

### **The Prabang: A symbol that associates the sacred with the profane**

Luang Prabang is an area rich in memories of traditional rituals, tales and myths that describe the relationships between the various social groups found there. As a result of this rich cultural history, the city has been described as a city of ghosts, evil spirits, cruel giants and *nagas*. In earlier times, the people of Luang Prabang believed in *Phi Than* or *Phi Fa* (the spirits of the sky), a belief that was based on an earlier belief in sky divinities, who, with powers far superior to those of human beings, could positively or negatively affect the lives of the human beings, animals, and plants on earth. The people therefore had to do whatever was necessary in order to satisfy the needs of the *Phi Than* or *Phi Fa* (the spirits of the sky) and *Phi Dam* (the ancestral spirits). They also believed in *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur*, *Pu Ngam Ya Ngam*, *Pu Lai Ya Lai*. In addition, *Phi Nak*, *Phi Mahesak* or city guardian spirits, were believed to lurk in areas associated with sites of the city's early establishment, a fact designated and signaled by the city pillar.<sup>5</sup> People believed that these spirits would help protect the city and its dwellers. Such a belief was shared among the common people, the bureaucrats, and the kings. Luang Prabang continued to be the city where rituals were practiced (i.e., a ritual space). The rituals practiced here expressed and enacted a belief in the connections between spirits and human beings, or between human beings and *Than* (gods), for it was believed that spirits could be representatives of human beings to communicate with *Than*.

The Prabang, a sacred image as well as a symbol of Buddhism, was brought into the city by the request of King Fa Ngum's wife, Queen Keaw Keng Ya who was a princess from the Khmer Kingdom. Because she lived in Khmer as a Buddhist, she could not accept the killing of animals. Witnessing the people in Luang Prabang

<sup>3</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 211.

<sup>5</sup>Charuwan Thammawat, *Annals of Laos include Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Muang Puan, and Champasak* (MahaSarakham: The Research Institute of Northeast Art and Culture, Srinakarinwirot University, 1985), 86-87.

killing elephants and water-buffaloes as offerings to spirits made her feel miserable. She therefore asked King Fa Ngum to introduce the Buddhism of Khmer to Laos.<sup>6</sup> Adopting Buddhism and bringing the Prabang image to the city of Luang Prabang in deference to the request of Queen Kaew Keng Ya indicates that the role of women in Laos was crucial and powerful in Lao society, especially on account of Buddhism. The impact of Buddhism's ascendancy over the traditional local beliefs is reflected in the transformation of Luang Prabang's identity, for Luang Prabang effectively became a Buddhist land. The traditional practice of offering worship to various spirits was reconciled with Buddhist rituals. As such, the people of Luang Prabang were able to maintain their long-cherished traditional beliefs while simultaneously accepting the new concepts introduced through Buddhism. Transformational processes occurred when symbolic representations of the sky spirits were re-imagined as Buddhist deities. The traditional practice of building spirit houses to connect people with spirits was paralleled and overlaid by the practice of building of temples. That is why many old spirit houses can still be seen to this day in temple boundaries, having been transformed into Buddhist script houses (*Hor Trai*), drum towers, or hermitage houses. Indeed, at the Chiangthong temple, one can find a god house with a hermit image on the top triangle of its roof. This is called a *Hor Rasior*, a hermitage house, and it represents the devotees' respect to the sky divinities for their assistance in protecting the temple area.<sup>7</sup>

Though the belief in spirits still exists in the memories of the people of Luang Prabang, a definite shift from the belief in animism to the new of set beliefs introduced by Buddhism took place. This was the period of the completion as well as negotiation between Buddhism and animism. The harmonious intersection of these two belief systems in Luang Prabang demonstrates the need for a predominant power to maintain the complementary co-existence of different world views. As Siraporn Na Thalang has noted, in Tai societies, there were conflicts between the traditional beliefs in animism and the Buddhist beliefs that were adopted by the rulers and disseminated among the people (for whom dependence on the supernatural power described and articulated through animism continued to play an important role).<sup>8</sup> As a result of this encounter, there arose question regarding the efficacy of each system. In other words, which belief system was capable of producing greater virtue – Buddhism or animism? People were faced with a choice. Eventually, what occurred in Tai societies was that there emerged a blend between these two beliefs, but a blend that came to predominantly support Buddhist beliefs. Consequently, Luang Prabang, which had hitherto been called the land of holiness, grew flexible and became a Buddhist land that managed to successfully blend Buddhism with the traditional beliefs of the indigenous people. In this way, ancestral spirits and Buddhism became a regular part of life among the people of Luang Prabang.

The blending of these two belief systems is exemplified by people's paying respect to the sacred symbol of the Prabang image, which symbolizes Lord Buddha, who is believed to bring happiness and prosperity to the land. Gaining popularity

<sup>6</sup>Mahakham Champakaewmani and Others. *Lao History*, trans. Suvit Theerasatsawat (KhonKaen: Department of History and Archaeology, KhonKaen University, 1996), 25–26.

<sup>7</sup>Woralan Boonyasurat, *Architecture Appreciation: The Temples in Luang Prabang* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 2005), 33.

<sup>8</sup>Siraporn Na Thalang, *Theory of Folklore Methodology in Analyzing the Myths – Legend* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2009), 349-50.

among worshippers, the Prabang assumed an important part in rituals, such as the supplication for rain. In similar fashion, elements of traditional animistic belief were influenced by Buddhism. For example, various spirits were re-imagined as the Prabang's guards, while others came to assume various functions in minor rituals. One such species of spirit is that of the *Phi Pu Yer Ya Yer*, spirits or ancestor spirits responsible for establishing and protecting the city of Luang Prabang. These spirits eventually came to be regarded as royal gods and assumed the new role of *Than*. Responsible for driving evil away, these and other gods still protect Buddhism up to the present day.<sup>9</sup> In some rituals like the traditional New Year ceremony, *Phi Pu Yer Ya Yer* spirits still take part as leaders who pour holy water over the Prabang image. This indicates the degree to which the people of Luang Prabang have adopted Buddhist beliefs. At the same time, it illustrates the powerful influence of Buddhism has had on traditional beliefs via the Prabang, which is regarded as a symbolic nexus point between spirits and human beings as well as that between spirits and the Lord Buddha (Buddhism). The Prabang Buddha image is thus seen as a concrete representation of Buddhism. This supports Emile Durkheim's notion that rituals and symbols of the sacred world form a concrete representation of a society.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Prabang is seen as the symbol representing the supernaturally powerful and miraculous Lord Buddha, who can create peace and prosperity for all people and their communities. Thus, the Prabang image plays a role in linking the sacred world of the spiritual and traditional beliefs of animism with the world of material reality which people perform toward the Prabang. It also plays a role in combining the spiritual and traditional animistic beliefs with practices in the real world of Buddhism.

### **The Prabang: A symbol of politics and power of the monarchy system**

In the past, Buddhism had a close relationship with the monarchy system. Religious institutions played a role in setting qualifications for anyone who would become a ruler or whose duty was to maintain and strengthen the stability of the social structure. Buddhism is one of the symbolic mechanisms used by the king as a framework of moral support aimed at bringing benefits to the nation. There are indications that it also functioned as a means of maintaining political stability as well as celebrating the glory and power of the monarch at the time. Powers and duties in ruling the country were related to patronizing Buddhism as well. As Ammara Pongsapich has noted, the monarch applied the belief in religion to the system of ruling the nation; thus, the people could not separate their religious beliefs from the ruling system of the monarch.<sup>11</sup> This is how the peace of the nation was maintained. It is logical to conclude that Buddhist beliefs and ideology were symbolically coupled with the prestige of the monarchy.

The Prabang myths also had an important role in reflecting the idea of power creation in the regime and the propagation of Buddhism in Lao society. The myths

<sup>9</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, *Naga Cities of the Mekong* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2006), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Paritta Chalermphao Koranantakool, "The Sacred World and the Profane World of the Social Life" In *Chao Mae, Khun Poo, Chang So, Chang Faon and other Stories of Ritual and Drama*. Paritta Chalermphao Koranantakool (Editor). (Bangkok: The Center of Manusayawittaya Sirinthorn (Organization Public), 2003), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ammara Pongsapich, *Culture, Religion and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Analysis of Thai Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1994), 71.

clearly manifested the prosperity and power of the monarchy system in Laos as shown through the Prabang image's sacred symbol which was set to represent the Lord Buddha who had supernatural powers and miracles. The seating of the Prabang image in the country was thus a mechanism for generating power and prestige for the monarchy; as such, the Prabang image can be seen to possess a hidden latent significance in relation to political stability. This has resulted in a belief in the sanctity of the Prabang image, specifically the belief that the enshrinement of the Prabang image in the city as the national Buddha image will bring happiness to the people of the city. This is why the Kings in the past occasionally moved the Prabang image to different locations, claiming to bring peace, happiness and prosperity to their people in the process. The content of some of the myths suggests that another reason for moving the Prabang image to different sites of enshrinement lies in the people's faith in the power of the Buddha image. But another reason for moving the Prabang image is its ability to bring people of ethnic diversity together, as with the case of the statue's relocation to the city of Luang Prabang. For example, Phraya Fa-Ngum asked to enshrine the Prabang in Srisattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao (Luang Prabang). But while traveling through the city of Wiangkham, Phraya Wiangkham, the ruler of the city, requested that the Prabang remain there for the sake of worship. The Prabang was thus located in Wiangkham. In 789 A.D. (1970 B.E.), Phrachao Srisattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao summoned a ship to carry the Prabang from Vientiane. The ship was wrecked at Gang Chan, the river in the south of Chiang Khan city causing the Prabang to sink and disappear into the water. It was soon discovered that the Prabang had been found and was enshrined in the city of Chan. Later in 838 A.D. (2019 B.E.), during the reign of Phraya La Num Saen Thai Poowanat, the Prabang was taken to be enshrined in Chiang Thong temple, which is located in the city of Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao (Luang Prabang). He then ordered the temple of Wat Manorom to be built and placed the Prabang there. During the reign of Phraya Wichool Raj Thibodee, in 921 A.D. (2112 B.E.), Phrachao Chai Chettathiraj founded the new capital city of Vientiane and named the city Chantaburi Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao. The Prabang, as well as the Pra Kaew Morakot and the Pra Saek Kham, were still enshrined in Wat Wichoolarajsattharam (in the old city) and its name was changed to Muang Prabang Rachathanee Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao later.<sup>12</sup> Phraya La Num Saen Thai Poowanat then handed over the city of Chiang Thong to the monks so that they could look after the Prabang while he brought the Pra Kaew Morakot and the Pra Saek Kham down to Vientiane. He dubbed the city of Vientiane "Phra Nakorn Chantaburi Srisattana Khanahut Utamaratchathanee." The city of Chiang Thong, in which the Prabang was then located, had been called "Phra Nakorn Luang Prabang" ever since the time of its enshrinement there.<sup>13</sup> The relocation of the Prabang to different places reflected the people's belief that the power of the Prabang could protect the city.

The Prabang plays an important role in naming the city and establishing the power of the ruling system, which serves to indicate not only the remarkable power of the monarchy but the spread of Buddhism in Lao society. In the legend of Khun Borom, the historical background relating to the establishment of Luang Prabang is mentioned, stating that the city was originally called Muang Chawa. When Khun Lo,

<sup>12</sup>Ministry of Education, Religious Department, *The History of the Important Buddha Images* (Bangkok, 1981), 207-211.

<sup>13</sup>Mahakham Champakeawmani, *Lao History*, 40-41.

Khun Borom's eldest son, established Muang Chawa (Sua) as the capital of Lan Chang around the 13<sup>th</sup> century (757 A.D. or 1300 B.E.), the city was renamed "Muang Chiang Thong."<sup>14</sup> During the reign of Praya Suwankhamphong, in 1316 A.D (1859 B.E.), it was changed to "Muang Luang."<sup>15</sup> During the reign of Prachao Chaichetthathiraj, in 1560 A.D. (2103 B.E.), a royal proclamation was announced to move the capital city of Laos to Vientiane for the purpose of balancing governmental control in the remote regions with regard to population, economy, and strategic planning. That resulted in a change in Lao's political systems. The Prabang image, however, was to remain in Chiang Thong, which was subsequently renamed "Luang Prabang". The monarch's decision to keep the Prabang image in Chiang Thong was considered a clever political strategy with regard to religion.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Prabang: The place of origin and aspects of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia**

Buddhism and numerous important Buddha images that are found in mainland Southeast Asia originated in India and Sri Lanka. Buddhism spread through the territories of Southeast Asia with the entry of the gold Buddha image, which had been made in Sri Lanka. The Prabang is the Buddhist symbol that entered the Khmer empire during a period of prosperity. At that time, the Prabang myth mentioned that King Supinaraj of Lanka (Sri Lanka today) had made the Prabang of gold, forming it in a posture that was meant to express the tranquility of the conflicts among his relatives, and gave it to the Khmer king, who was his close friend. The Buddha image had been worshipped in Lanka for 963 years before it was given to the Khmer king. In Cambodia, the image was located in the city of Inthapattha for 502 years until the reign of Chao Fa Ngum, a king of the Lao Kingdom, who asked for the image to be relocated to the city of Lan Chang. During the imperialistic era of the Siam Kingdom, the Prabang was brought to Siam twice before returning to Luang Prabang. The delivery of the Prabang to different places throughout Southeast Asia instilled a common belief among the people in the region in the divine power of the Prabang. This reflects a common disposition among people of Southeast Asia.

Various myths of the Prabang are recounted from memory by the people of Luang Prabang. Mr. Thongpan Sawatdee of Ban Songtai Village, Jompet District, Luang Prabang gave an account on the route of the Prabang before being enshrined in Luang Prabang:

The Prabang belonged to Cambodia. Chao Fa Ngum took away the son of the Khmer King. He brought the Prabang on a raft to the city of Xieng Thong along the Huang River in Thailand. He went past the city of Pak Lai in Xaiburi region, Thadua, Khong River until arrived at Baan Saluan and Baan Lueng. Then he went through Chiang Maen, crossing Khong River, and seated in Chawa, then in the city of Xieng Dong, and later in Xieng Thong, which the name was changed to be Luang Prabang during the reign of Chao Fa Ngum. The Prabang belonged to

<sup>14</sup>Thongsueb Supamark, *History of Laos* (Bangkok: Office of the Welfare Promotion Commission for Teachers and Educational Personnel, 1982), 36.

<sup>15</sup>Term Wipakpanakit, *History of Laos* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Printing, 1997), 19.

<sup>16</sup>Martin Stuart-Fox, *History of Laos*, trans. Chiraporn Vinyarath (Bangkok: Toyota Foundation, 2010), 15-16.

Chao Fa Ngum and was located in the palace. Common people had no chance to witness it; only aristocrats and scholars had access to it. The Prabang in the museum was the reproduction. The original is not to be seen.<sup>17</sup>

73 year-old grandmother Tee of Sang Hai Village, Pak Ou District, Luang Prabang, shared some of her memories, inflected with a bitter tone, about the Prabang, “The original Prabang is not in Luang Prabang anymore; it was taken back to Thailand. The current Prabang is an imitation. The original is in Thailand. They took the Prabang; Thais took away the Prabang.”<sup>18</sup>

An elderly woman named Kaenjan Jantapasert, a 105 year-old villager of Ban Wiang Kaew, also shared her thoughts: “The Prabang is meaningful to Lao people because it is a sacred image that people spiritually rely on. It is unknown as to where the genuine image is kept, despite a rumor that it is in Thailand. However, we now worship the local image, which is believed as sacred as the original one.”<sup>19</sup> Boonpeng Seeudomjan shared her memories of the Prabang, stating: “The Prabang is an important Buddha image that has been with the nation since ancient times, being highly respected by Lao people. There is a rumor that the genuine image is presently stationed in Vientiane.”<sup>20</sup> Some groups of Lao people have not paid careful attention to stories of the past; nevertheless, they have positive memories of the image. For instance, Seejan Hinpaphan, a villager from Phonhuong, and Toomnewong Kattiphalad, a villager from Phonphaeng, who shared similar memories, reported the following: The Prabang is very sacred. When people who have problems make a wish and ask for blessings, they become satisfied and receive good things for their lives. The Prabang is very important to Lao people and it is an essential part of their lives. They have paid respect to this image since the olden days.<sup>21</sup>

Stories about the Prabang from the past remain in the memories of the people of Luang Prabang. The myths of the Prabang show how the ethnic races have been formed. Widespread reverence for the Prabang not only shows the shared beliefs and ritual practices surrounding the Buddha image among the Lao and Thai people, it also reflects the recognition of a mutually shared spiritual space. Despite political conflict in some matters, this shared belief can be regarded as an integral element in the “network of the Buddhist culture” or “Buddhism network.”<sup>22</sup> Typically, the people of Southeast Asia do not deny or scorn a Buddha image or a god from other places, and this degree of acceptance serves to confirm the commonality shared among a people who also share the same ideology. The myths of the Prabang

<sup>17</sup>Thongpan Sawatdee, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, SongTaiVillage, JomPetch District, Luang Prabang Province, LaoPDR, February 7, 2010.

<sup>18</sup>Tee, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Sang Hai Village, Pak Ou District, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, February 6, 2010.

<sup>19</sup>Kaenjan Jantapasert, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Wiang Kaew Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 24, 2011.

<sup>20</sup>Boonpeng Seeudomjan, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonhuong Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 22, 2011.

<sup>21</sup>Seejan Hinpaphan, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonhuong Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 22, 2011; Toomnewong Kattiphalad, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonphaeng Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 23, 2011.

<sup>22</sup>Pathom Hongsuwan, “The Myths of Lan Na Buddha Images: The Problematic Beliefs and Local Relations” (MahaSarakham: Mahasarakham University, 2009): 184.

also provide evidence for the political and cultural implications of belief in a Buddha image, and these implications are reflected in the way in which physical and spiritual spaces are used and imagined.

### **The Prabang: The meaning reflecting through the posture and the hidden force**

The Prabang is a statue of the Buddha in a posture that signifies “calming the relatives” or “calming the ocean” – the full name of this posture translates as “stopping the relatives from fighting over the water in the ocean.”<sup>23</sup> The Buddha is in a standing position, with both of his hands raised to the level of his chest, palms facing forward, in a gesture of prohibition and cessation. This depiction of the Buddha also signifies the Prabang’s role in bestowing the message of Buddhism on the Lao people, inviting them to commit themselves to Buddhism. The Buddha’s posture shows that there is supernatural power of which can influence the people’s lifestyle. Lao people pay great respect to the image, and it is believed that the sacred power of shared faith can successfully unite the various ethnic peoples of Laos, as well as generate positive mental states that can aid and strengthen the people when dangerous incidents or civil unrest occur.



Figures 1 and 2: The Prabang Buddha Image. Photographs by Supawan; courtesy of oknation.net

The Prabang, which signifies the presence of the Buddha, represents a mode of communication between Lord Buddha and man. For example, at the traditional New Year or Songkran Festival, the people of Luang Prabang used to bring the image out and pour water over the image. The ancestral spirits of *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* changed their role, becoming angels charged with the protection of the Prabang and leading the water-pouring ceremony. This demonstrates the power of the Prabang (representing Buddhism) had over other beliefs.

<sup>23</sup>PraThammakosachan Unuchari, *The Myths of Various Buddha Images* (Bangkok: The Institute of Religious Promotion, 1976), 269.



In that period of Lao history, though the king tried his best to foster unity among the people of Luang Prabang, there emerged problems associated with the expansion of territory and the control of those territories among the kings many sons. The establishment of major cities in the kingdom of Lan Xang incited royals to compete for the crown. The country was invaded, and people suffered. The Lan Xang kingdom had its share of internal fighting, and the land was eventually divided into two parts, namely Luang Prabang and Vientiane.<sup>24</sup> The Prabang played an important part in the monarchy's rule over the country, for it was strategically used by the kings to reunify the Luang Prabang people under its power and holiness.

The relocation and enshrinement of the Prabang image in Luang Prabang signified the need for unity among the relatives, noblemen, and people of Luang Prabang. Considering the posture of the Prabang image, it is almost as if the Prabang represented the descent of Lord Buddha to earth in order to stop the quarrelling among the people, which, if left unchecked, could result in chaos and damage to the nation. The posture of the Prabang underscores the latent power of this unifying symbol, for, in the two raised hands, we not only see a prohibitory gesture, but we also observe a gesture of integrity, equality, and equity. Therefore, it is likely that the Prabang myths are accurate, and King Fa Ngum enshrined the Prabang image in Luang Prabang in order to keep the country calm and peaceful.

The Prabang is a sacred symbolic image that is necessary for the prevention of conflict in the nation, and its protective function is clearly evidenced by the collapse of the Lan Xang Kingdom. That is, within a period of two decades, the kingdom was divided into three sub-kingdoms.<sup>25</sup> The ensuing conflicts along with the weakness of the three sub-kingdoms resulted in their falling into Siam's political control in 1779 A.D.<sup>26</sup> A number of sacred Buddha images were taken to Thonburi, including the Prabang and the emerald Buddha image.<sup>27</sup> In 1780 A.D., the king of Thonburi appointed Chao Nanthasen as ruler of Vientiane until Siam changed its capital from Thonburi to Rattanakosin. His Majesty King Prah Buddha Yodfa Chulalok (King Rama I) then graciously permitted King Nanthasen to take the Prabang back to Vientiane. The following statement appears in the legend of the Emerald Buddha:

In the reign of King Rama I, the King of Vientiane paid a visit to present silver and gold flowers along with tributes. Before returning, the King of Lao requested permission to take the standing Buddha image, namely Prabang back to Laos, stating that the Emerald Buddha and Prabang could not share the same shelter because that would bring about droughts and famine. The Siamese King thus graciously granted permission to take the requested image back.<sup>28</sup>

The event mentioned describes King Nanthasen's request for permission to take the Prabang back to Laos so that the image would not be stationed at the same place with the Emerald Buddha, but it might have been due to the Lao people's lack

<sup>24</sup>Mahakham Champakaewmani, *Lao History*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Grant Evans, *Brief History of Laos: Country in the Central Part of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: O. S. Printing House, 2006), 25.

<sup>26</sup>Sila Weerawong, "Three Kingdoms of Lan Xang Land," in *History of Laos* (KhonKaen: Department of History and Archaeology, KhonKaen University, 1996): 71.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart-Fox, *History of Laos*, 19.

<sup>28</sup>Term Wipakpotjanakit, *History of Laos*, 104.

of peace and happiness as well as their fear and suspicion while living in a state with a dependent status. The people needed a spiritual center that they could grasp and rely on. The Prabang in the memories of the Lao people still played a significant role, for it was regarded as a Buddha image with the power to protect and provide peace and happiness. Indeed, the Prabang was regarded by the people of Laos as so powerful that it had the ability to summon rain. Owing to the common perception of its miraculous powers, the people wished to have the Prabang stationed in their home country so that they could worship it forever.

The return and enshrinement of the Prabang held the promise of harmony among relatives, honesty and loyalty among the bureaucrats, and unity among the people. In addition, the latent power expressed in the posture of the Buddha image's hands, according to the beliefs of the Lao people, was related to fertility, especially with regards to the sky, rain, and agriculture. As such, it is believed that the Prabang Buddha image is a catalyst for seasonal rain. This is why most people in Lao, in reference to this hidden power, call the Prabang Buddha image the "Begging for Rain Buddha image." Muen-on Panfongkham, a 78 year-old man, reported the following:

"The Prabang is a sacred Buddha image that our ancestors have taught us to worship since ancient times. The image is very important for Lao people, for it is capable of making the rain fall in the right season. A ceremony is thus held each year, during which a large crowd of people gather to join the procession of the Prabang."<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, the meaning of the Prabang according to the belief in terms of people's ways of life is that it brings happiness and prosperity to the society. For the meaning in terms of the political system through the king's power, it brings happiness and harmony. The power of the Prabang is shown through the Prabang image and its posture. It is the power that brings peace, happiness, and prosperity to the nation and its people.

### **The Prabang: The role of bringing prosperity and fertility**

The sacredness of the Prabang is illustrated by supernatural miracles associated with fertility and the bringing of rain in the rainy season. Rainfall is a fundamental concern in Luang Prabang, an agricultural society. The practice of ceremonially pouring water over the Prabang, which is believed to bring good fortune to the people of Luang Prabang, has been performed for many generations and is still done today. In the traditional New Year ceremony, the people of Luang Prabang bring the Prabang Buddha image out for people to bathe. This is called the "Hod Song Festival," and it occurs in the fifth Lunar month or April. The act of pouring water signifies the removal of dirt as well as purification from any negativity of the preceding year. In the ceremony, people bring flowers, traditional perfume, incense, and candles in order to properly worship the Prabang image. At the same time, the people request seasonal rain from various angels and gods so that everyone might benefit and be happy.<sup>30</sup> It has been said that, during the people's New Year parade, experts and monks and novices celebrate the ceremony by bringing the Prabang from the museum to the temple of Wat Mai Suwannapoom Alam in order to enshrine it there for three days so that people may pay their respect and pour water

<sup>29</sup>Muen-on Panfongkham, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Komkawang Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 20, 2011.

<sup>30</sup>Somsamuk Meesai, *Kobjai tee liewbung* (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1988), 3.

over it. At the same time, ancestral spirits like *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur*, which represent the older traditional beliefs, are invited to attend the ceremony. The practice is that people pour water over the Prabang for the sake of fertility as it is true that in the agricultural society, crops need water from natural rainfall. In addition, bathing the Prabang during the New Year celebrations symbolizes the washing away of the inauspicious elements that complicate life. The people of Luang Prabang believe that if they treat the Prabang correctly, they will be rewarded with security, peacefulness, and fertility. At the same time, ancestral spirits like *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* were also invited to participate in the ceremony as representatives of traditional beliefs. The participation of *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* demonstrates that the conflict between the older beliefs in ancestral and local spirits and the people's commitment to Buddhism has diminished. The parade of the Prabang is an evidence of the association between man and the gods. It shows the connection between the ancestral spirits and the people of Luang Prabang trying to glorify Buddhism and treat the Prabang as a living image. However, the ritual ceremony also celebrates the *Phi Fa Phi Than* (spirits of the sky) and signals the belief that the world and the universe were created by the *Than* or great *Than*. Apart from the belief that the creator of the universe and the world is God, Lao people also believe that *Than* is the creator of human and can give them fertility as well.



**Figures 3 (above) and 4 (next page):** The Parade of the Prabang in traditional New Year Ceremony. Photo by Channipha Doungwilai April 17, 2010



The Prabang is a symbol that combines the beliefs in Buddhism with traditional beliefs. When Buddhism entered the land, causing conflicts between human and supernatural powers, the angels, spirits, and giants of the older, local belief systems were reduced to a secondary role, effectively becoming ghosts who guard the Prabang and, occasionally, leading participants in certain Buddhist ritual practices. The roles of the Prabang slowed down when the monarchy power rose. The Prabang's role as it relates to the ruling monarch has since disappeared. This illustrates the shifting meaning and role of the Prabang as it relates to defusing potential conflict between local supernatural beliefs and the Buddhist beliefs of the people of Luang Prabang. However, the status of the Prabang as a sacred Buddha image has persisted in the hearts and beliefs of the Lao people from past to the present. Paying proper respect and treating the Prabang accordance with the beliefs of the people of Luang Prabang is believed to bring fertility and prosperity to the country.

## Conclusion

The myths of the Prabang are sacred narratives conveying a meaning of togetherness in the community and reflecting the power hidden in the thoughts, beliefs and emotions of Laotian Buddhists. With the introduction of Buddhism, the ritual space of Luang Prabang was usurped, resulting in a negotiation between Buddhism and traditional beliefs and a compromise between ancestral spirits and Buddhism. When the Prabang image assumed its role as the symbolic nexus point of these two belief systems and came to be regarded as a protector, authority, and

bringer of happiness and peace to a unified people, Buddhism became the mechanism that reflected the power relations between the state, the people, and the traditional beliefs. The Prabang conveys these meanings by informing the very name of the capital city that enshrines it, thereby associating the ruling powers with the holiness, prosperity, fertility, and stability that it signifies, as well as endorsing the authority of the king who managed to overcome the internal conflicts born of religious and cultural difference. The posture of the Prabang image symbolizes its capacity to engender the Lao people with a spiritual status, bestowing upon them a strong life of morality, honesty, loyalty, and harmonious unity. Finally, the Prabang also illustrates its own shifting meaning and its role in defusing the conflict between earlier beliefs in supernatural powers and Buddhism. Ultimately, it is seen to bring peace, abundance, and prosperity to the country.

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