

AMUSEMENTS DURING SONGKRAN FESTIVAL

by

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On the first day of the Songkran Festival after the morning offerings of food to the monks, people, especially the lads and lasses of the village hastily go back home in order to change into a new set of clothing and to give retouches to their faces and hair. They go to a nearby wood to collect wild flowers as offerings to the Lord Buddha on New Year's Day. The trees that bloom during Songkran are "ton Khoon" (cassia fistula) and "ton Pradu" (pterocarpus macrocarpus) The flowers of the former hang down in beautiful yellow clusters, while those of the latter are a profusion of yellow and sweet-scented. Trees bearing flowers in early April are called in the Thai idiom "blooming to welcome Songkran". The young people go in mixed groups of five, six or ten. They first sing merry songs and amuse themselves. Sometimes they sing repartees to the others of the opposite sex. After flowers are gathered they repair to the village wat or monastery. Here the party divides itself according to the sexes; the boys in one group and the girls in another. They then go into the "bot" or temple of the village monastery leaving ample space between them as a dividing line. All sit on their heels in a worshipful attitude with hands palm to palm holding bunches of the gathered flowers. Hands are raised to foreheads and a sort of wishing or resolution begins. This is popularly called "pitsatan"; a word corrupted from the Pali "adhitthan" which means a resolution. The leader of the lads' party will begin a wish in modulated tones in the following pattern of words;

"พิธีฐานขอ มีหนึ่งถาดพาน พานแต่ดอกอ้อย เกิดชาติใดแสนใด ขอให้ได้คน ช้อล่อ" which freely translated means:

"A wish, dear! In one hand I hold a tray, a tray of "aw" flowers only. In my numerous rebirths let me have always a person named *La-aw* as my wife."

Then there is a refrain by the other lads in the party as follows:

“พินฐานวานโหว่ ขอให้ได้ดังพินฐานเออ”

(A wish as prayed may it be so, dear!)

It is to be noted that there are two words underlined; for the man has to use his wit to name a flower to rhyme with the name of the girl in the other party. The name of the flower is not necessarily that of the flower he is holding. Sometimes instead of naming a flower to rhyme with the name of a girl, he may select the name of a flower to rhyme with any distinctive mark of the girl, as :

“พินฐานเออ มือหนึ่งถือพาน พานแต่ดอกแก้ว เกิดชาติใดแสนใด ขอให้ได้คน
หันมามร”

(A wish, dear! In one hand I hold a tray. A tray of *vae* flowers only. In my numerous rebirths let me have always a person who wears a *prae* (silk) scarf as my wife.)

Then follows a refrain which may not necessarily be the same pattern of words, thus :

“พินฐานวานโหว่ ขอให้ได้ดังใจเราคิด ฐานเออฐานลง ขอให้ตรงดังพินฐานเออ”

(A wish as prayed, may it happen as we wish. A wish, dear, is made. May it come true.)

After expressing such a wish, the lads' party waits a while in order to give time to the girls to make a reply. The leader of the girls then begins a reply which is of course in the negative with such words as follows :

“พินฐานเออ มือหนึ่งถือพาน พานแต่ดอกแก้ว เกิดชาติใดแสนใด ข้าให้ได้แก่น
ข้อพักตร์”

(A wish, dear! In one hand I hold a tray, a tray of *rak* flowers only. In my numerous rebirths let me not have the man named “*Phak*”.)

Then comes a refrain in the same pattern as above but in the negative. Any boy or girl who is inexperienced in making such a wish or repartee in a sing-song voice may join in the chorus until he or she is able to do so. If a person wants to say something to

someone in particular in the other group but is unable to do so, he or she may ask someone else in the group to do it. Sometimes the words run high and the elders are obliged to stop it. Only flowers are offered as a symbol of worship to the Buddha, no candles and incense sticks, for these come later in the culture of the people and only in the progressive areas.

After worshipping the Lord Buddha, both parties repair to an open space in the wat or village ground under shady trees, for the sun is very hot during such a time, to join in amusements and games peculiar to the locality. There is an interval from 11 a.m. to noon, when the monks take their meals. Beyond this monks cannot take any substantial food until the next morning. In the afternoon the lads and lasses renew their games and amusements. Usually in the girls' party there is an elderly woman with wide knowledge and experience to instruct and guide the girls and children in traditional games and amusements. Before starting, the girls will beat a drum inviting the boys to join the party. Usually the young men of one village will join the girls' party of another village, and vice versa. The games and amusements come to an end late in the afternoon, but they may sometimes continue into the night. In such cases torches are lit. The games played during night time require little space owing to restricted light. There are folk dancing, folk songs with or without repartee or any other games they can invent. Such games and amusements are numerous, and many of them are peculiar to the locality. Drunken brawls or any other undesirable occurrences were rare in the old days. When they did happen, the older people of the village would act as officers of peace and stop the play at once.

These games and amusements may be carried on for three, four days or even a fortnight after Songkran if no rain is in sight. The main occupation of the people is agriculture, therefore the young people have nothing much to do for they cannot begin ploughing until there is rain. They have to while away their idle time before beginning the arduous toil of agricultural life.

The woodland where the young people collect flowers as offerings to the Lord Buddha during Songkran was, in the old days, not very far from the village. It required about half an hour's walking to reach such a woodland or jungle. Now in many places this condition is otherwise. The woodlands and jungles recede farther owing to the extension of arable lands. If people wish to reach such a place from the village they have to take an hour or more. To go by car to gather flowers deprives one of half the pleasure and charm. The custom of collecting flowers is now on the wane and will perhaps disappear altogether with so many new attractions to hasten the change.

In his book "The Customs and Ceremonies of the Lao People in the North-Eastern Region", Luang Phadung Khwaen Prachant (หลวงผดุงควั่นประจักษ์) has described the custom of gathering flowers on Songkran day of the people in that area which differs slightly from that in the Central Region of the country. He wrote it some fifty years ago and I do not know how much has changed in what he depicted. This is what he says :

"About two o'clock in the afternoon, after the ceremonial bath of Buddha images, the monks and the young people go in a body to gather flowers in the wood. They have with them flower holders made of bundles of "ya kha" (lalang grass) tied in three interval parts. The lower end has a three legged frame to support it. These are distributed by the monks to the party. Reaching their destination in the wood, the party stop under a shady tree. After a while they separate to various places to gather flowers in the wood, and arrange them artistically in the holders standing in a row at the rendezvous. When the evening sun, sending his last long rays, floods the surrounding place with shades of colours, the scenery looks very beautiful, and peaceful. The people also have with them some musical instruments, usually a two face drum, a gong and a pair of cymbals. The procession leaves the wood accompanied by the sound made by such primitive musical instruments. Reaching the wat they place the flowers around the Buddha images that have received a Songkran

ceremonial bath in the morning. At about seven o'clock in the evening the villagers are called together by the beat of a big drum. Young and old assemble at the open ground of the wat. Some of them have to attend to the monks, serving them with drinking water, cigarettes, and betelnut. Then their celebration begins. They joyfully sing and dance until ten or eleven o'clock at night, when everyone goes home. The young men escort the girls home, flirting along the way in pairs."

The author further states that the party while going out to gather flowers on mounds or hillocks in a wood or on their return sometimes meet another party. Then they vie with each other by beating on their musical instruments as loudly and as primitively as they can. Whichever party can beat the loudest is the winner. Here ends my story of Songkran.
