

Songkran Day

Suchart Trakulwilaiwan

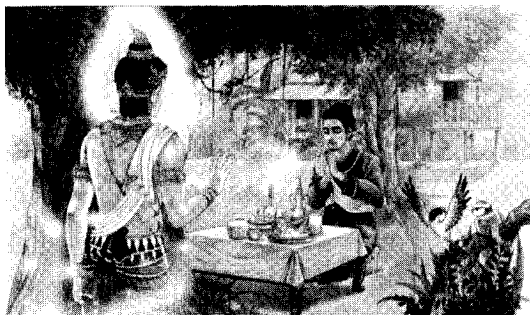
Songkran Day

A. Suchart Trakulwilaiwan

The Sanskrit word ‘Songkran’ means lapse into or ascension to, of the sun, from the zodiacal constellation of Pisces to that of Aries , a normal progression into the following zodiac. According to Thai astrology, the sky is divided into 12 sections, each of which is called a zodiac, a Greek word meaning a living being. Overall, 12 zodiacs equal 360 degrees, completing a circle.

Ancient peoples tried to explain nature according to the geocentric notion as evidenced in the vestige in most cultures; say, the sun rises or sets, the result of the earth revolving around the sun and spinning around itself. As per the heliocentric notion, the sun at the center and the other 7 planets orbiting around it, in a year, we on our primordial Mother circumnavigate our cosmos, perceiving the 12 main constellations and others, which we are approaching right up there in the vast firmament. However, Thai zodiacs play more with the naming of the 12 months of the year and the resultant terminologies being used mainly in fortune-telling—to count the birth month. In other words, the zodiacs were derived from the west. A slight reference is made only to mark Thailand’s original New Year’s day, which falls on the 13th of April of every year. The origin of Songkran day is a unique mystery, encompassing the deadly gambling game of wit, symbolizing the defeat of old values to be superseded by a newer but less noble one. The following

is the origin of Thailand's water festival or Songkran Festival, which was inscribed at Wat Prachetupon or Wat Pho in Bangkok.



In those days, there lived a childless rich man near his neighbor, a habitual drinker who sired two children. Often sneered at, the millionaire became so crestfallen that he decided to make sacrifices to the gods of the Sun and the Moon. He prayed incessantly for three years, but this went in vain.

Time passed until one day when the sun ascended to the apparent position of the zodiacal constellation of the Aries, the rich man accompanied by his attendants went to a banyan tree on the river bank. There, he had cereals cleansed seven times in the river, and then cooked. He prayed to supplicate for a child from the sylvan deity.

“Before death, my only wish is to be given a chance to have an heir,” he begged.

“I have come to beg for a son from you, Banyan Divinity,” he continued.

“Out of faith in your mercy, I am looking forward to having my wish fulfilled,” he concluded.

Out of compassion, the banyan god went up to seek an audience with Indra, King of Heaven. Shortly, Indra graciously commanded an angel named Dhammaban, the virtue keeper, to be born in the womb of the rich man’s wife.

When born, the baby boy was named Little Dhammaban. The father hastily had a castle built under the banyan tree for his stripling to dwell in.

Later on, the growing boy, Little Dhammaban, acquired mastery of the bird language and learned the three Vedas of the Hindu religion. At the age of 7, he could finish his education. He became an astrologer to make divine revelations to the general public.



His fame spread enough to reach a Brahma named Kabil-brahma,

“Let’s see who is the better between us in the field of divination,” roared the brahma. “I will behead you unless you outshine me”. He then appeared in front of the youth, saying,

“Smart boy, I have heard of your erudition, so I want you to prove it through 3 riddles.”

“I don’t think I will be able to answer your noble riddles. I was born just a human being. How dare I compete with a celestial being?” the boy said humbly.



“You cannot escape; I know you will never be at wit’s end,” said the brahma. “To intensify the game, I will stipulate an exacting condition that the loser, either you or me will have to be decapitated in worship of the victor’s acumen,” the brahma went on.

“Is that right?” added the brahma.

“If there is no way out, I will try my best, Brahma,” said the boy.

“I am waiting for this moment,” said Kabil-brahma.

“Where does human aurora dwell in the morning?” said Kabil-brahma. “This is question one,” he said confidently.

“And where is it at noon and in the evening?” said the brahma. “For riddles two and three,” lastly said the brahma.

On the spur of the moment, Dhammakan, at his wit's end, said deferentially:

“Could you spare me seven days to figure out the answers to your riddles?” implored the youth.

The human contestant pondered and pondered.

“Oh, it's beyond my ken,” exclaimed the adolescent.

“What steps should I take?” he said to himself.



On day six, the desperate boy sneaked out of his residence and chose to seek refuge under a toddy-palm tree.

“Why on earth am I waiting for divine retribution?” he thought, “I prefer to die clandestinely rather than undergo capital punishment from Kabil-brahma.”

Fortunately, on the palm tree there lived an eagle family.

“Honey, where should we ferret out food tomorrow?” said the eagle to her spouse.

“We both will surely go to enjoy gnawing the corpse of the lad, Dhammaban,” explained her spouse, “Kabil-

brahma will definitely and earnestly slay him once he admits failing to procure the answers,” said the male eagle clearly.

“What answers?” said his wife.

“The answer to the three riddles,” said the other confidently.

“My dear, what riddles was he to answer?” inquired the wife.

“The riddles are altogether three questions raised by Kabil-brahma with intent to slay the boy, who is celebrated by the general public for his divine knowledge.

The husband eagle recounted the whole event and tried asking his spouse the three riddles and the wife couldn’t answer them, either.

“Do you think you can answer them?” said the angry housewife as she turned to look downward.

“My dear, who on earth is that lad lying hidden underneath?” said the surprised wife.

“Kind of a runaway boy. He looks troubled and thoughtful. Maybe he has a broken heart. Or is a solitary traveler. Something like that,” concluded the prideful bird.

“Let’s resume the story of the predestined boy. He will die an early death. In this world, only us---the denizens of the vast sky can know everything. This is because we are avian beings, not scavengers like the stale vultures. We are able to fly high and possess far vision.

We are equipped with far-sightedness and omniscience,” bragged the eagle.

“My dear husband, please stop boasting. I want to know the answers to the enigmatic questions. Please tell me quickly. I am not too old to know,” said the hot-tempered wife.

They didn’t notice the glint in the lad’s eye.

“OK, my dear! Please listen to my revelation. In the morning, human aurora dwells in the countenance. Humans have to wash their faces every morning. This is tacit practice. Right? Then, at noon, brilliance is enshrined in the chest where perfumery is sprinkled. As per evening time, splendor is suffused in the feet, which need washing before bedtime,” explained the conceited husband.

“You should acknowledge how profoundly knowledgeable I am,” said the male bird.



As the wife eagle was nodding in agreement, she glanced down to see pensive Dhammaban listening to them with interest.

“Ah! Ah! My dear. Do you see the lad underneath?” the wife said.

“Of course! What’s wrong with him again?” said the wise bird.

“Do you think Dhammaban is of the same age and stature as this lad?” wondered the lady bird.

“Don’t think too much. This fool cannot understand us,” said the careless husband, “Dhammaban must be prepared for his due date tomorrow at his residence. From my aloof viewpoint, he must be at his home before his death. I see him now addressing a farewell speech to his poor parents,” commented the proud eagle.

“I like eating human liver and lungs and I’m calculating whether such an amount of his fresh can satisfy my appetite,” said the hungry wife.

“We will bring his two eyeballs for our ravenous kids. They are so delicious. Our children would love them,” said the caring father. “Dhammban is a learned lad. His flesh is good for our sight,” he added.

Enlightened Dhammaban under the palm tree gladly rose up and hurried back home, waiting for the due appointment with Kabil-brahma.

On day seven, Kabil-brahma stood defiantly before Dhammaban, who said, “I am here to answer your stipulated enigmas. My answer to questions one, two, and three are countenance, chest and feet, respectively. Humans wash faces in the morning, sprinkle perfumery on the chest at mid-day and wash feet before bedtime. This is to make aurora auspiciously radiant”. Dhammaban retold what he had heard.

To his shock, Kabil-brahma turned pallid and said, “You are such a learned person. Regardless of how you got them, I am the loser and I will have to do as agreed,” said the discouraged brahma.

Kabil-brahma summoned his seven daughters, who were Indra’s concubines for an urgent meeting.



“I will have to decapitate myself in worship of Little Dhammaban. If my head were on earth, the world would be ablaze. If it were cast into the air, drought would befall the world. If thrown into the ocean, it would cause the water to dry up. I command that you receive my head with a tray and a pedestal,” commanded Kabil-brahma. He then cut off his head and handed it to his eldest daughter, Thungsadevi. Then, she led the procession of her father’s head clockwise around Sumeru Mountain for 60 minutes and had it enshrined in Khaduli Cave in Krailas Mountain.



Thence, every year one of his seven daughters has taken turns being the Songkran Goddess of the year in charge of leading the brahma's head procession around Sumeru Mountain for 60 minutes and had it kept at the same place. Each of them has kept practising it on a rotation basis like this.

The first day of Songkran Festival is counted when the sun enters the Aries and this is called "Maha Songkran Day." This time line is used for figurative and predictive significance of the whole-year-round well being of Thais as follows:



วันแรกวันสงกรานต์



วันสองวันสงกรานต์



วันสามวันสงกรานต์



วันสี่วันสงกรานต์



วันห้าวันสงกรานต์



วันหกวันสงกรานต์



วันเจ็ดวันสงกรานต์

If Maha Songkran Day falls on **Sunday**, the Songkran Goddess is Thungsadevi on garudaback, wearing a bracelet, a pomegranate in between the pterion, her attire decorated with lotus crystal, living on cluster fig, carrying a discus, and a conch.

If it is on **Monday**, comes Korakadevi, on tigerback, with an Indian cork in between her pterion, her attire adorned with opal, fond of oil, carrying a sabre, and a staff.

If it is on **Tuesday**, comes Rakshadevi on boarback, with a sacred lotus in between her pterion, her attire adorned with moonstone, relishing on blood, carrying a trident and a bow.

If it is on **Wednesday**, comes Mandhadevi, on donkeyback, with a champak in between her pterion, her attire adorned with chrysobery, thriving on milk and butter, carrying a sharp-pointed slab and a staff.

If it is on **Thursday**, comes Kirinidevi, on elephantback, with a magnolita in between her pterion, her attire adorned with emerald, dwelling on bean and sesame, carrying a war scythe and a gun.

If it is on **Friday**, comes Kimitadevi, on buffaloback, with a lotus flower in between her pterion, her attire adorned with topaz, feeding on bananas, carrying a sabre and a fiddle.

And lastly, if it is on **Saturday**, materializes Mahodhorndevi, on peacockback, with a hyacinth in between her pterion, her attire adorned with black spinel,

subsisting on hogdeer meat, carrying a discus and a trident.

The story of Kabil-brahma's jealousy, Dhammaban's difficult birth, his victory, their contest and the filial duty of the 7 Songkran Goddesses is the backdrop of our festivities. Young people can show gratitude to elders and do good in quite a number of ways. However, there is a growing concern that this fine culture is getting more and more adulterated by indiscrete minors who commit sacrilegious acts as reported in newspapers every year.

Ajarn Suchart Trakulwilaiwan obtained a B.A. and an M.A. from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and has been serving Assumption University since 1988. He is mainly interested in the English language, its teaching, literature and other related fields, for the sake of comparative studies, in depth analyses and applications in life.