



Rocket festival

Traditionally, the rocket festival is the sixth Lunar month ceremony that Lao people have conducted for many generations. It is a symbol of unity and friendship used to fight against dry weather and to request rain.

Even though, belief in the rain god is less now than in former times, Lao people continue to respect this tradition and continue to prepare the rocket festival as one of the most significant activities that takes place before of the season of rice cultivation. In addition to the preparation of rockets, there are some Buddhist ceremonies such as water blessing rituals that the senior monks perform at the same event.

The Rocket festival is the only opportunity the farmers have to request rain from the rain god called Phaya Thaen. The rocket festival was instituted because of the strong belief held since ancient times, when the land was dry and farmers did not have enough water for rice production. It is the one means for human beings to communicate symbolically with the god to request rain.

There are two stories about the origins of the rocket festivals as follows:

Phraya Khankhaak, the Toad King

Once upon a time, when the load Buddha was not yet enlightened, he had to be born and reborn to accumulate sufficient merit fitting to be the Buddha. In one of his lives, he was born Phraya Khankhaak, the Toad King.

Because of this merit making and loving kindness, all the humans and animals respected him. The news of this well-respected human king made the rain god, Phraya Thaen so jealous and humiliated.

In order to spoil the name of the Toad King, Phaya Thaen did not send the rain to earth for 8 years and 8 months. People had no water for cultivation and consumption. A huge number of vulnerable people and animals died. Only the strong survived.

All surviving creatures on earth decided to fight Phaya Thaen for rain. The Naga King and his naga or mythical serpent troops volunteered to start the war against

the god of rain. In this battle, the Naga King and his naga or mythical serpent troops lost and they received many wounds.

Then the King of Bees and his army took over the war. The fighting took many days and huge numbers of bees were killed. The King of Bees and his troops met the same fate as the Naga army.

All other creatures were very afraid. Finally, the Toad King decided to go to the front lines. He had a clever plan of three steps. In the first step, he sent the termites to eat the handles of the swords of the god of rain and his army.

In the second step, he sent the King of Scorpions and his troops to the sky to hide themselves in the firewood and clothing of the gods and goddesses and be ready to bite at any time. In the morning when the God of Rain and his soldiers woke up, they would be bitten when they took their firewood and when they got dressed. When they took the handles of the swords, all of the handles would be destroyed and broken and become useless.

In the third step, the Toad King ordered his troops to begin the fight. Since the God of Rain's soldiers suffered from the bites of the scorpions, they were not brave enough to fight. When they took up their weapons, all their weapons became useless. The King of the toads sat on horseback and chased after the God of Rain. Finally, the God of Rain was captured and tied up. The King of Toads was the winner. They made an important treaty after they had seized the God of Rain.

The peace treaty was made. Some articles were outlined as follow:

1. The rocket must be made to communicate between the earth people and the God of Rain. Every year, before the raining season arrives, the earth people have to prepare the rockets and send them to the sky to remind the God of Rain to pour the rain down for rice fields and other crops.
2. The sounds of the frogs are the signals to show that the rain has already fallen down. When the rain arrives, the frogs have to shout out, signaling that there is plenty of rain available for rice planting.
3. Kites and flute sounds are the means of signaling that the harvest season has arrived. When the God of Rain hears these sounds, he has to stop sending the rain and wait until he sees the rocket in the next year.

Thao Phadaeng-Nang Ai or Prince Phadaeng and Princess Ai

Once upon a time, King Phya Khom ruled Muang Nonghaen or Thitanakhon peacefully and the people were content.

Unfortunately, the rain did not fall for 8 years and 8 months. It was a very hard time. Many people and animals died. The God of Rain was so angry he did not send the rain and the land was very dry.

In order to request for rain Phya Khom instructed his people to make the rockets for competition. The winner would receive half of the kingdom and the hand of his daughter, Nang Ai.

The news of this festival spread everywhere. Many kings such as Thao Xianghian, Xiangda, and Muang Song brought their people to join the festival. Among these kings was Thao Phadaeng of Phaphong Kingdom. All of them wished to be the winner so that they could claim their rewards and have the beautiful Nang Ai or Nang Aikham as their wife.

Thao Phangki (the son of the Naga King) heard the news of the acclaimed beauty of Nang Ai and fell in love with her. He decided to join the festival as well. He transformed himself into a white squirrel with a golden bell around his neck. Every morning and evening, Phangkhi the squirrel gently jumped on the branches of the fig tree near Nang Ai's palace. When Nang Ai saw him, she liked him and wanted to have him as her pet.

The day for the rocket competition arrived. Many rockets were fired. Some launched up while some stood on the station. Xianghian's rocket went up to the sky. It was the highest one. Phadaeng's rocket was broken. Phya Khom's rocket stayed in the firing station for three days and nights. Nang Ai should be the wife of Xianghian and half of the city should be allocated to him as well. But Nang Ai had fallen in love with Phadaeng so she was very sad.

Nang Ai told the hunter to catch the squirrel for her. The hunter could not catch it alive so he decided to use his arrow to shoot the squirrel. The squirrel fell on the ground and died. Before he died, he begged the gods; "Please make my meat about 8 oxen carts full and enough for all to eat. The people who eat my meat, will die like me."

After he died, the city people shared the meat with everyone but the widows.

When the Naga King heard that Thao Phangkhi was killed, he was very angry. He sent his troops to destroy Muang Nonghaen. All people were killed except for the widows, for they did not eat Tao Phangkhi's meat.

While the people of Nonghaen were meeting their disaster, Phadaeng rode his horse to rescue Nang Ai, but they could not escape because she also ate the squirrel meat.

Types of Rockets

There are two types of rockets. The first type has no tail. These are: Bangfai phou, bangfai phangiang, bangfai talai, bangfai dokmai, bangfai kongkao, bangfai ma. The second type has tails and is classified as four sorts as below:

1. Bangfai noi is the small rocket. It is used to check if the rain will arrive on time or not. If it goes very high up that means lucky.
2. Bangfai hoi is the one which contained less than 12 kilos of gun powder. It is made for competition.
3. Bangfai mune is the one which contained between 12 kilos to 119 kilos of gunpowder.
4. Bangfai sene is the biggest rocket which contained 120 kilos of gunpowder.

Even though the rocket festival is an old tradition, the Lao people still believe in the festival and continues to practice it to today. Some of the reasons for the festival includes:

1. to promote friendship and relations among the villagers
2. to keep the national heritage
3. to describe conditions of people's lives
4. to build confidence that the Gods will send rain for crop cultivation
5. to reduce worries by merits and fun making
6. to motivate people and attract tourists
7. to make money and help the local economy