

## A Comparative Study of Beliefs Found in Thai and Myanmar Legends

*Su Su Khin*

*Yangon University of Foreign Languages, Yangon, Myanmar*

*Truong Thi Hang*

*Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, Lampang Rajabhat University*

*Pra Chacksha Saisang, Sanom Khрутmuang*

*Naresuan University (Retired)*

*E-mail: susu.khin@yufl.edu.mm*

### Abstract

Legends, collections of stories, are conventional stories that may incorporate supernatural creatures and mythological components, but they are related to districts or individuals. In Thailand and Myanmar, the people have solid trust in myths, and they are superstitious about these beliefs. Henceforth, the objectives of the study are to explore beliefs in Thai legends and Myanmar legends; to identify the types of beliefs and to find out similarities and differences between the types of beliefs in Thai legends and Myanmar legends. In this research, the concept of Kingkeo Attagara (1976), which divides beliefs into 11 types, was used as the conceptual framework. The types of beliefs found in 308 legends (154 Thai Legends and 154 Myanmar legends) collected from books and interviews were categorized. The 8 types of beliefs were commonly found in both Thai and Myanmar Legends. Among them, the type of belief most found in both Thai and Myanmar Legends was Type 3: beliefs in sacred things. It is hoped that the present study will be valuable for the language students and the individuals who are attempting to broaden their insight on writing and history of the Thai and Myanmar society.

**Keywords:** Legends, Belief, Myanmar, Thais

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## 1. Introduction

Legends have been playing a vital role in the past or nowadays literature as well as in the real world. People use legends as media to reflect the important role of cultural, social, historical, religious, belief, etc. On the other hand, beliefs are regarded as one of the significant elements in human society. In Thai society, there are many beliefs in every sector, the source of beliefs, rituals according to different traditions and customs. Surayut Meenaphan (1997) noted that "Although today there is a great advance in science and technology, it is found that belief in astrology still has an influence on the way of life of people in society" (Surayut Meenaphan, 1997, pg. 11). In addition, beliefs of the people play an important role in controlling and encouraging human beings to become a traditional way for daily life.

The people around the world are living in divergent communities with their own cultures, beliefs and traditions. The advocator, Sanom Khрутmuang (2016) stated that "Folktales create fun and enjoyment. Entertainment is hidden with knowledge, morality, culture, beliefs, values, a reflection of society in each locality, country and each religion" (Sanom Khрутmuang, 2016, pg. 1). So, it is necessary to do the contrastive analysis to achieve better understanding of neighboring countries. Turning into Thailand and Myanmar, neighboring nations, it is needed to recognize and respect the beliefs of each other. As the religions of Thai and Myanmar people are Buddhism, the customs and traditions of both people are essentially similar, and most customs are gotten from religion. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the legends are the sources to explore their beliefs. Since the Thai and Myanmar individuals follow numerous beliefs and traditions, it is interested to explore their beliefs reflected in their legends. The present study aimed to explore the similarities and differences of beliefs found in the legends in Thailand and Myanmar.

For the conceptual framework in this analysis of beliefs of the Thai and Myanmar people, the researchers made use of the concept of Kingkeo Attagara (1976: 93-94) that has divided the beliefs of the people into 11 types as follows:

Type 1: beliefs in peoples' life, for instance, naming; spirits; death and rebirth in various forms according to karma; communicating with sprits; and suttee

Type 2: beliefs in environment and events, for instance, stone axes; manuscripts, for and against in building a house; using mercury to make people fly; and crown of thorn plants

Type 3: beliefs in sacred things, such as cat parade, cactus, Gods, magic spell, guardian spirit, temporary shrine

Type 4: Sexual beliefs, for instance, a girl with large breasts show that she is erotic; If father is a womanizer, the son is often a womanizer like his father.

Type 5 : Beliefs about health and well-being, for instance, eating bananas; drinking alcohol; hairs; the person who has abscess should not eat sticky rice; the people with long ears can live longer; and if the person who was bitten by the sunbeam snake sees the sun, he will die.

Type 6 : Beliefs about auspicious time, luck, omen, vulture, pigeons, bees, people born on Saturdays are callous people, lizards' sound, looking at characteristics of doves, vision and omen.

Type 7 : Beliefs about talismans, occultism, talisman cloth, talisman cloth, a piece of cloth with inscriptions, Takrud amulets, Buddha amulets, Nang kwak, aloe, golden boy spirit (Kuman Thong), Nang Kwak (woman spirit), amulet wild pig teeth.

Type 8: Beliefs about dreams, dreaming of snakes or get bitten by a snake, dreaming of peacocks, predicting dreams by days

Type 9: Beliefs about ghosts and spirits, butterflies, grandparent spirit, Phi faa spirit, banana ghost, Krasue ghosts, Phi luang ghosts, Phi khon ghosts, ghost haunting

Type 10: Belief in hell and heaven and

Type 11: Belief in astrology: Fortune-teller; Sompong characteristics for finding spouses; auspicious day or inauspicious day; Baby gender prediction; Predicting the characteristics of people based on the day they were born on (i.e. Rahu, Satan, etc.); and Telling the fortune of the people by looking at their appearance (parts of the body).

As mentioned above, in this study, the framework of Kingkeo Attagara was used to explore the beliefs found in the Thai and Myanmar legends and attempted to compare the types of beliefs found in the Thai legends and the Myanmar legends.

## **2. Research objectives**

1. To explore the beliefs reflected in the Thai and Myanmar legends
2. To identify the different types of beliefs in the Thai and Myanmar legends
3. To find out similarities and differences between the types of beliefs in the Thai and Myanmar legends

## **3. Methods**

The mix-approach was used as the research method in this study. The outcomes were measured by using the qualitative data gathered from the literature, books about legends and local individuals. The 4-step-procedure was used in doing this research. The steps were data collection process; translating process; data analysis process; and presenting the results which included the types of beliefs found in the legends and the similarities and differences between Thai and Myanmar legends.

### **3.1 Scope of the Study**

The research was intended to determine two main themes. Firstly, the beliefs derived from the legends were explored based on the conceptual

framework of Kingkeo Attagara. Secondly, the types of beliefs were compared to investigate the similarities and differences between the Thai and Myanmar Legends. Concerning this, from the Thai side, 154 Thai legends, 2 legends each from 77 Thai provinces, were chosen to study. In Myanmar, there are altogether 14 states and divisions. To examine the legends in similar numbers, 11 legends each from 7 states and 7 divisions of Myanmar were selected. So, in this study, the total amount of 308 legends in Thailand and Myanmar were studied and classified into 11 types of beliefs.

### 3.2 Research Questions and Research Hypothesis

1. What are the different types of beliefs found in Thai legends?
2. What are the different types of beliefs found in Myanmar legends?
3. What types of beliefs are the most and the least found in the Thai legends? Why?
4. What types of beliefs are the most and the least found in the Myanmar Legends? Why?

The research hypothesis for this study is “There will be a difference between the types of beliefs in Thai legends and Myanmar legends.”

### 3.3 The Materials

In the study, there were a sum of 308 legends: 154 Thai legends and 154 Myanmar legends gathered from the interviews and previous written works. Since Thailand has 77 provinces, 2 legends were collected from each province. To have a similar number of legends to accomplish portrayal, 11 legends were gathered from 14 states and divisions in Myanmar. Among the several legends collected, the target legends were chosen by the board of scholars. In analyzing the data, the conceptual framework of Kingkeo Attagara (1976) was used to identify the types of beliefs found in the legends.

### 3.4 Data Collection

In gathering the information, the researchers conducted the interview with the local people, the old-aged or experienced ones in historical matters. The interview data were audio-recorded. The data were also collected from the previous written works. Then the researchers submitted the data to the board of the scholars to decide whether they were acceptable. After getting the approval, the 308 legends were set as the primary data for this research.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Based on the interview responses and the data got from books, the beliefs could be explored. Firstly, the audio-recorded data were transcribed in the Thai or Myanmar language. Then the transcribed data and the data gathered from the books were translated into English. To classify the beliefs found in the legends, the first-round reading was conducted and the researchers took notes, discussed and defined the possible beliefs. Then, after the second-round reading, the data were put into 11 types of beliefs under the framework. For the third-round detailed reading, the researchers made sure that the data were sorted to the particular type correctly to assess the reliability of the data. Then data were compared and summarized based on the 11 types of the Kingkeo Attagara's framework (1976, 93-94).

## 4. Conclusion

In this research, the 308 Thai and Myanmar legends had been studied to investigate the types of beliefs found in the legends. The types of beliefs that most commonly found in Thailand and Myanmar are the same. Moreover, as the national religion of both Thai and Myanmar is Buddhism, Thai and Myanmar people are similar in their beliefs and traditions.

The results can be seen that the people from both countries have strong beliefs in Type 3: beliefs in sacred things. The type of belief that was found the least in both Thai and Myanmar is Type 2: beliefs in environment and

events, for instance, stone axes; manuscripts, for and against in building a house; using mercury to make people fly; and crown of thorn plants. It was also surprisingly found out that, among 308 legends, there was no legend which was found out as Type 4, Sexual beliefs; and 5, Beliefs about health and well-being. So, it can be concluded that although there were differences in the numbers in each type, there would be similarities found in comparing the types of the beliefs found in the Thai and Myanmar Legends.

As the researchers studied the legends in terms of identifying and comparing the types of beliefs found in Thai legends and Myanmar legends, the present study is hoped to be useful not only for the language learners but for the individuals who are attempting to augment their insight on culture and conventions of Myanmar and Thai people.

## 5. Discussion

### The types of the beliefs found in the Thai Legends

In categorizing the beliefs found in the Thai legends using the conceptual framework Kingkeo Attagara, Beliefs Type 1 was found in 5 legends, e.g. the legends of Chao Pho Phra Wo (เจ้าพ่อพระวอ) of Tak District, Pha Nang Hai (ผานางไห้) of Chon Buri District, San Chao Phor Khun Dan (ศาลเจ้าพ่อขุนด่าน) of Lamphun District.

Example Legend: The legend of Chao Pho Phra Wo “เจ้าพ่อพระวอ”, there was a brave Karen warrior, named "Chao Pho Phra Wo". He died in war. People believed that, because of his heroism and sacrifice, his spirit still protects Thailand's sovereignty and peacefulness until today. So, this legend reflects a belief in the spirit of the Chao Phor Phra Wo, which was found as a Type 1.

Type 2 in 1 legend: There is only 1 legend under Type 2.

Example Legend: It is the legend of Mae Nak Phra Khanong “แม่นาคพระโขนง” of Krung Thep.

In the legend, there was a female ghost named Mae Nak who haunted the villagers in Phra Khanong. The villagers bring Sambong leaves to hang at their house to protect the Mae Nak ghost. So, it can be seen that the people have a belief on Sambong (*Blumea balsamifera*) leave (ใบหนาด) that could make the ghost being afraid.

Type 3 in 116 Legends: Some of the legends are legends of Luang Pho Sothon (หลวงพ่อโสธร) of Cha Choeng Sao District, Phra That Kham Kaen (พระธาตุขามแก่น) of Khon Kaen District, Muang Sawi (เมืองสวี) of Chumphon District.

Example Legend: The legend of Luang Pho Sothon “หลวงพ่อโสธร” 200 years ago, a Buddha image was floating along the northern part of Chao Phraya River. The villagers tried to pull the Buddha image but it did not success. After they had built a temporary shrine, they could pull the small Buddha image easily, and then they enshrined at the temple. In conclusion, the legend of "Luang Pho Sothon" appears to make people believe in sacred things and about building a temporary shrine for worship.

Type 6 in 10 Legends, e.g. Luang Pu Dinosaur (หลวงปู่ไดโนเสาร์) of Kalasin District, Ban Phra Muang (บ้านพระม่วง) of Trang District, Khao Nang Hong (เขานางหงส์) of Phang Nga District.

Example Legend: Luang Pu Dinosaur “หลวงปู่ไดโนเสาร์”

In 1991, Luang Ta Wichit discovered a vision of the future, and he saw a large number of huge animals died. After seeing this vision several times, he got down from the top of the mountain. Around noon, because of the heavy rain the land was eroded to see dozens of large bones according to his vision. There is a belief in a vision of the future.

Type 7 in 12 Legends, e.g. Khao Nang Thong Haeng Mueang Phan (เขานางทองแห่งเมืองพาน) of Kamphaeng Phet District, Ban Nong Mon (บ้านหนองมนต์) of Chon Buri and Phra Khwang (พระขวาง) of Chumphon District.

Example Legend: Khao Nang Thong Haeng Mueang Phan “เขานางทองแห่งเมืองพาน”.

One day, the King of Naga swallowed a beautiful woman, Nang Thong. At that time, Phra Ruang, the King of Phan city, saw that event and saved her life by using his supernatural power. However, one day, a crocodile ate Nang Thong. As Phra Ruang was a holy person, he cursed the crocodile into a stone there until today. There is a belief in holy words and curses which is occultism. So, people have a belief about occultism.

Type 8 in 7 Legends, e.g. Khao Bai Si (เขาใบศรี) of Chanthaburi District, Phra Khwang (พระขวาง) of Chumphon District and Phra Nang Ruela Lom (พระนางเรือล่ม) of Nonthaburi District.

Example legend: Khao Bai Si “เขาใบศรี”

A woman wanted to offer food to the monks at home, but she did not have beautiful plates. In her dream, an angel told her to make a wish in front of the cave on the mountain. After she had made a wish, the cave opened and let her bough plates and bowls. According to the dream, after her donation ceremony, she had taken them back to the same place. So, it could see that there is a belief about dream.

Type 9 in 15 Legends, e.g. the Orphaned Little Ghost (ท้าวกำพริ้น้อย) of Chaiyaphum District, Mae Nak Phra Khanong (แม่นาคพระโขนง) of Krung Thep, and Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima (เมืองนครราชสีมา) of Nakhon Ratchasima District.

Example legend: The Orphaned Little Ghost “ท้าวกำพริ้น้อย”

In a small town, there was an orphan who survived his life by planting. He used silk thread to capture an elephant, a tiger, a viverra and Phaya Hung (cultural hero). The last one he caught was the little ghost. Finally, the little ghost agreed to be a henchman. So, the legend shows that people believe about the ghost.

Type 10 in 1 legend. It is Kong Khao Noi Kha Mae (ก่องข้าวน้อยฆ่าแม่) of Yasothon District.

Example Legend: Kong Khao Noi kha Mae (ก่องข้าวน้อยฆ่าแม่)

In a village, a farmer killed his mother, because when he was working, his mother was late for sending him a small amount of food. When the woman died, her eyes showed the worry on whether her son might go to hell and the door to heaven would be closed. So, this legend reflects the beliefs in hell and heaven.

Type 11 in 9 Legends, e.g. San Yai Hom (ศาลยายหอม) of Nakhon Pathom District, Lak khet Khao Phanom Rung (หลักเขตเขาพนมรุ้ง) of Buri Ram and Phaya Kong Phaya Phan (พยากงพญาพาน) of Nakhon Pathom.

Example legend: The legend of San Yai Hom “ศาลยายหอม”

When the queen of Kanchanaburi is pregnant, a wise astrologer prophesied that the queen would give birth definitely to be a son who will be with great dignity and courage but he will be Oedipus. The queen asked her man to kill her son, but an old woman in a village saw him and adopted him. However, as the astrologer predicted, the son killed the king. The belief in astrology was found in this legend.

It was found that the beliefs Type 4 and Type 5 could not be found in Thai legends.

### **The types of beliefs found in Myanmar Legends**

In analyzing the beliefs of the people found in the Myanmar legends, beliefs Type 1 was found in 7 legends; e.g. Shin Zalun (ရှင်ဇလွန်) of Tanintharyi Province, Shweguni Phaya (ရွှေဂူနီဘုရား) of Sagaing Province, Pakhoku (ပုခူကူ) of Magway Province.

Example legend: Shin Zalun (ရှင်ဇလွန်)

In the legend Shin Zalun, there was an angel who became a carp, when she died, because of her sins. The lady carp ate the dirt from the hermit

and gave birth to the human twins. So, it reflects the belief in the death and rebirth in various forms according to Karma.

Type 2 in 2 legends. They are Pha An (ဖားအံ) of Pha An Province and Bayin Nyi Cave (ဘုရင့်ညိုဂူ) of Pha An Province.

Example legend: The legend of Pha An (ဖားအံ)

There was a Naga (dragon) in the Thanlwin River. One day, it ate the frog that swallowed the mercury. Because of the power of the mercury, the frog survived by scratching the Naga's stomach. Finally, the Naga could not stand and then it vomited the frog. This legend reflects a belief about mercury which can save life.

Type 3 in 106 Legends; e.g. Shwedagon Pagoda (ရွှေတိဂုံစေတီတော်) of Yangon Province, Shwe Tan Tin Phaya (ရွှေတုံတစ်ဘုရား) of Magway Province and Zalun Pyi Taw Pyan Phaya (လွန်ပြည်တော်ပြန်ဘုရား) of Irrawaddy Province.

Example legend: Shwedagon Pagoda (ရွှေတိဂုံစေတီတော်)

More than 2600 years ago, the two merchants met the Gautam Buddha during his time and received the 8 strands of Buddha Hair. When they took the Hairs in their hands, the Hairs shown forth in a thousand brilliant hues that illumined the woodlands. The earth trembled with joy and wonder and the resounding clamor arose as the seas and oceans leapt forth in exultation. So, the legend reflects a belief in the sacred things of God.

Type 6 in 3 Legends, e.g. Mahamuni Phaya (မဟာမုနိဘုရား) of Mandalay Province, Min Maha Giri (မင်းမဟာဂီရိ) of Mandalay Province and Along Sithu Min and Tea Tree (အလောင်းစည်သူမင်းနှင့်လဖက်ပင်) of Shan State.

Example legend: Mahamuni Phaya (မဟာမုနိဘုရား)

In Gaudama Buddha lifetime, King Jantra Thuriya had a strong desire to worship the Lord Buddha. One day, the Gaudama Buddha came to him and predicted that Buddha's relics would be enshrined in Kyauk Taw and people

would worship and build many stupas throughout the country. At that time, the earth shook, and the ocean boiled. King Jantra Thuriya was shocked and asked the fortune teller about the meaning of the vision. They said that the vision was that the Lord Buddha would come to his places. This legend reflects a belief about the vision.

Type 7 in 7 Legends, e.g. Shweguni Phaya (ရွှေဂူနီဘုရား) of Sagaing Province, Shin Motti (ရှင်မုတ္တီး) of Tanintharyi Province and Naw Bubaw mountain (နော်ဘူဘောတောင်) Bago Province.

Example legend: The legend of Shweguni Phaya (ရွှေဂူနီဘုရား)  
One of the sacred things of Shweguni Buddha Image is that if a person wants to be the expert of talismans and amulets, he had to perform his tasks in this temple to get success. So, it reflects that there is a belief in talisman and amulets and black magic.

Type 8 in 4 Legends, e.g. Phowin Taung (ဖိုလ်ဝင်တောင်) of Sagaing Province, Kinari Kinara (ကိန္နရီ ကိန္နရာ) of Kayah State and Shwe Settaw (ရွှေစက်တော်) of Magway Province.

Example legend: Phowin Taung (ဖိုလ်ဝင်တောင်)

One day, King Bandawa and his soldiers visited around the country. They slept overnight on the way near a mountain. This King dreamed that the Buddha came to get “attainment of Fruition” there. The Buddha prophesied that over one thousand years later, King Bandawa will build many Buddha images. Then the mountain was named according to the dream of the king. It reflects a belief about the dream.

Type 9 in 30 Legends, e.g. Min Maha Giri Nat (မင်းမဟာဂီရိနတ်) of Mandalay Province, Jat Gu (ကြတ်ဂူ) of Kayah State and U Shin Gyi (ဦးရှင်ကြီး) of Irrawaddy Province.

Example legend: Min Maha Giri Nat (မင်းမဟာဂီရိနတ်)

In the Ava period, there is a very strong man, Maung Tint De, who was able to subdue the elephants. Due to the strength of him, the King stressed over being assaulted throne. So, the king arrested him and tied him to a Champa tree for burning alive. Then, Maung Tint De became Min Maha Giri Nat (spirit). People believe that this spirit can protect them until today. So, this legend reflects a belief in spirits.

Type 11 in 7 Legends, e.g. Sao Lak Muang Mae Aung Tha (မယ်အောင်သာမြို့ဦးကျောက်တိုင်) of Tanintharyi Province, Shwe Jetyet Shwe Jetja (ရွှေကြက်ယက်ရွှေကြက်ကျ) of Mandalay Province and Kinari Kinara (ကိန္နရီကိန္နရာ) of Kayah State.

Example legend: Sao Lak Muang Mae Aung Tha (မယ်အောင်သာမြို့ဦးကျောက်တိုင်)

During the reign of King Ekarachracha, due to the heavy rain, it was flooded and damaged the city wall for three consecutive years. Therefore, the King consulted with astrologers. According to the prediction, the King announced to build the city wall by exchanging the life of human beings. Then, his men announced to get the volunteer sacrifice themselves. This legend reflects a belief in astrology.

The belief type 10 was not found in Myanmar. Like the results in Thai Legends, the beliefs types 4 and 5 could not be found in the Myanmar legends.

### Comparison of the Types of Beliefs Found in Thai Legends and the Myanmar Legends

In this study, the type of belief which was the most found in Thai Legends and Myanmar Legends was Type 3. There were 116 Thai and 106 Myanmar legends. The least common types of beliefs were also the same. In Thailand, there is only 1 out of 154, which expresses the belief Type 2. And in Myanmar, there are two legends which reflect the Type 2. Only one Thai legend reflects Type 10, yet Type 10 was not found in any of the Myanmar legend. It can be surprisingly seen that the beliefs Type 4 and Type 5 could not be found in both Thai and Myanmar. The results are shown in the following table, Table 1.

Table 1. The comparison of the type of beliefs in legends in Thailand and Myanmar

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7	Type 8	Type 9	Type 10	Type 11
Thai legends	5	1	116	0	0	10	12	7	15	1	9
Myanmar legends	7	2	106	0	0	3	8	4	30	0	7

The results showed that the most common belief types of belief in Thai and Myanmar legends was Type 3-belief about sacred things. The reason could be because of the national religion of both countries, Buddhism. It is also aligned with the concept of Chalatchai Ramitanon (1987) “Beliefs are the basis for making both good things and bad things. The ancient people led the children believe to worship and respect sacred or religious things.” Religious beliefs have power over people in the culture of each society. It was also suited to Phra Somkiat Titchai’s result (2006) which showed that the most found beliefs in folktales of Nakhon Thai district were the beliefs in sacred things.

So, it can be seen that, in analyzing and comparing the types of beliefs found in the legends between Thailand and Myanmar, both express 8 types of beliefs except Type 4 and 5. And in Myanmar legends, there is no belief under Type 10. Besides, the types of beliefs the most and the least commonly found are similar among Thailand and Myanmar. So, the present result unfollows the view of Stith Thompson (1977) which was stated that the cultures and beliefs might be different in different countries around the world. It could be said that they may have different beliefs yet not among Thai and Myanmar people.

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