

Research Article

Function of *Por Ta* shrine at the Ban Chiao Sai community in the province of Suratthani

Anyamas Phoophet^{*} and Apisit Ouiskun

Faculty of School of Liberal Arts, Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat 80160, Thailand

Abstract

This article aims at examining functions of Pho Ta shrine in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province. It is revealed from the study that Pho Ta shrine worshipping ceremony of Ban Chiao Sai Community, where most inhabitants live by rubber cultivation, eminently present the villagers' collective identity by showing their gratitude toward Pho Ta, the guardian spirit of rubber plantation who also looks after the people, once a year. Following their ascendants, the shrines are built by reusable materials like wood chips or rubber tanks. Four functions of Pho Ta Shrine: 1) to release people's tension 2) to reinforce social orders 3) to impart local belief and ritual 4) to preserve the community's identity, are found, as well.

Keywords: Pho Ta Shrine, Ban Chiao Sai Community, Functions of Folklore

^{*} Corresponding authors:

Anyamas Phoophet E-mail: anyamas34421@hotmail.com

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Introduction

The southern part of Thailand is the upper area of Malay Peninsula so that most of inhabitants earn their livings by growing large scales of rubber plantation since the pluvial land between the both-sided coastal areas with high average of rainfall is suitable for cultivating tropical plants, especially the rubber tree that make more consistent income than other plants so that it is regarded as a type of important economic crops with great earning potential toward both the country (corresponding with economic recovery condition) and the agriculturalists. (Deerassamee, 1999)

Because the foundation of belief begins with ignorance of the supernatural. Belief in ghost worship therefore appearing in every locality of Thailand. Although the South has a multicultural character. But due to the topography is mostly forest and related to occupations such as rubber plantation, orchard, etc. In these occupations often uncontrollable events such as being attacked by poisonous animals, low yields, floods, etc., which is why villagers in the south believe in the supernatural as a mental refuge from these problems.

Despite of living in the modern scientific world, rubber plantation owners in the southern part of Thailand, like other cultivators in the old traditional days, mentally rely on supernatural beings, especially ones with both positive and negative power over their lives and carriers, which depend too much on natural environment and weather condition, from the ancestral times. Almost all of the farmers there believe that anywhere may dwell long- period possessive spirits, then have turned to be guardian spirits called "Chao Thi" or "Thevada Arak" in Thai. From generations to generations, the Thai still count that this positive type of ghosts is the positive one who can protect that particular place and dwelling people after receiving appropriate worship, so the guardian spirits seem like the dwellers' ancestors and are invited to rest separately in a house-shaped shrine in order to please them to keep their eyes on the land from being invaded by evil spirits.

As for the rubber plantation in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province, local people pay respect to the guardian spirits named "Pho Ta" in general who watch the cultivating areas, protect the plantation owners from any harm and help increase the agricultural products. This strong belief brings

about the establishment of Pho Ta shrines and the yearly worshipping ritual. Here are three types of spirits who are considered as Pho Ta:

- 1) Former land-owner spirits
- 2) Ancestral spirits
- 3) Wandering spirits nearby without any

correspondence with the areas.

Pho Ta shrine is one of the things that reflects the spirit worship of this community which is different from the surrounding area where the unique rituals still continuing and appearing in only this community. It reflects the common belief in spirits among the people in the community that remain strong in the area.

Different from urban and other surrounding communities where deity's shrines for "divine guardians" called "Phra Phum" are established, the inhabitants of Chiao Sai Community do not only uniquely build their Pho Ta shrines by reusable materials like wood chips and rubber tanks to express their sincerity to the sacred souls but also continue the yearly worshipping ceremony while others living outside the village no longer perform this kind of rituals. All these interesting cultural phenomena, thus, lead to the study of functions of Pho Ta shrines toward folk people that makes them still believe in Pho Ta shrines and have inherited the rituals until nowadays.

Objective

To examine the functions of *Pho Ta* shrine in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province

Research Methodologies

Functions of folklore methodology is the principal theory applied in this research; it focuses on the correspondence between "a text" and "its social contexts" to examine how that "selective" piece of folklore as it is a type of cultural information that can support men's psychological needs and reinforce the society. (Na thalang, 2014, p. 359)

According to William R. Bascom's article "Four Functions of Folklore" (Bascom, 1954) he generally categorized the functions of folklore into these four groups: 1) to describe the origination and reasons of ritual performance 2) to educate people in oral tradition 3) to maintain social behavioral standards 4) to entertain and release an individual's tension.

Due to analyze all functions of *Pho Ta* shrine, both its text and contexts, both the belief and the ritual, toward the rubber cultivators in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province, Bascom's viewpoint mentioned in the aforesaid is applied. It helps find out how people use the belief, the ritual and even the story of this guardian spirit to serve their socio-psychological needs along with identify themselves and indicating personal roles in the society.

Scopes of Research Project

Four scopes are concerned in this research: informants, contents, area of study and studying period.

1. Informants - Two local ritual performers are the key informants
 - 1) Mr. Sawat Buamanee (ages 78)
 - 2) Mr. Pinyo Phromkao (ages 63)
2. Contents - to examine socio-cultural functions of *Pho Ta* Shrines
3. Area of study - Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province
4. Studying period - from January to June, 2020 (six months)

Researching Processes

1. Reviewing related literature, which mention about belief, ritual, shrine-establishment and functions of folklore, from written document, articles, researches, books, journals, etc., as sources of the research
2. Observing and gathering document from field studies in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province
3. Categorizing the document in order to serve the analytical process
4. Examining the sources of study respectively by applying folklore methodologies
5. Analyzing, concluding and discussing all findings.

Results

Owing to study the prominent believe and unique materials of *Pho Ta* shrine in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe

Phanom, Surat Thani Province, these four functions are found:

1. Tension releasing function
2. Social training function
3. Cultural transmitting function
4. Identity establishing function

1. Tension Releasing Function

Due to the rubber cultivation has become the principal work of more than a hundred families in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Ban Chiao Sai Community is located in the area and soil conditions suitable for rubber planting, even in the periods of recession, since the ancestral days because of its averagely high economic income, the villagers concern much about this business. Danger from poisonous animals, for example; snakes, spiders, centipedes, etc., business recession problem and shortcoming of products a thoroughly worried, too.

Southerners believe that there is sacred protection in every area, especially in occupations related to the area often appear rituals of worshipping sacred things in order to accomplish their work well. Sacred things may manifest themselves in various forms, whether in the form of spirits or animals, that can either benefit or harm which is consistent with supernatural beliefs because it is something that humans cannot control, as same as folk people believe in Ban Chiao Sai Community.

According to the belief of *Pho Ta* guardian spirit¹ which has been generationally and absorbingly passed on, **snakes are regarded as *Pho Ta*'s attendants so that hitting or doing any harm to the serpentine creatures are prohibited; whoever who turn his deaf ear to the warning will confront with a bigger serpent when he visits the plantation next time. If a farmer ignores *Pho Ta*, he will encounter snakes in his rubber plantation time and again. To pay respect to *Pho Ta* spirit, nevertheless, brings about prosperity as expected, so the plantation owners build a separate shrine in ones' cultivating area for the yearly worship.** This may be due to the fact that the forests in the area are fertile and abundant with snakes, cause folk people believe that snakes are sacred animals.

Influenced by the establishment of the deity's shrines for divine guardians' dwelling, *Pho Ta* shrines, derived from the spirit's name calling, are built as mentioned before in order to invite the

¹ The name called by local people

spirit to permanently reside in the rubber plantation. (Promkaew, 2019)

Considered from the above, to establish *Pho Ta* shrines can release people's tension since they believe that this guardian spirit protects them and their land from danger and poisonous animals along with bringing about prosperity, wealthiness and happiness to the entire community.

2. Social Training Function

According to Na thalang (2014) remark, folklore functions as a key mechanism for educational system; it educates, cultivates, and transmits all cultural matters through folk document: narratives, beliefs, rituals, etc. On the other hand, social "rules" originates from, at least being influence by, "lore" to guide people's expected behaviors so that all behave similarly, then get together.

In the case of *Pho Ta* spirit, likewise, the belief and ritual have been constructed in correspondence with occupational and weather conditions. Since the cultivating lands are located in a humid zone, inhabitation of poisonous animals, Snakes, the eminent ones, are worshipped as the guardian spirit's attendants from these following reasons: 1) In spite of being venomous, snakes are infrequently found in natural environment for they hide themselves from human, especially the deadliest species like king cobras (Suwanwaree, 2014, p.7) 2) serpentine creatures rarely bite others unless they are attacked. It can be assumed that to regard snakes as *Pho Ta*'s attendants is to avoid people from encountering and harming this kind of animals for the sake of safety.

Distinctively from generation to generation, the rubber plantation owners dare neither to dissatisfy *Pho Ta* nor break any corresponding traditions for they have been told by their ascendants that ones who do not pay respect to the spirit will face with troubles; they and their families will be in danger, feel ill, have economic problem or fail to get enough qualified products. Apart from establishing *Pho Ta* shrine as the spirit's permanent dwellings, the worshipping ritual is held once a year within the defining period; if not, the disobedient ones are "warned" by the guardian spirit by confronting with snakes too often, encountering obstacles, having unexplainable physical pains, etc. According to ritual performing manuscript, the pain of the particular part of body is specified by the direction of wrongdoing (Buamanee, 2019):

- 1) The north = indigestion and vomiting
- 2) The East = head ache
- 3) The west = body swelling

- 4) The south = foot pain
- 5) The northeast = chest tightness
- 6) The northwest = dizziness
- 7) The southeast = hand pain
- 8) The southwest = stomach ache

To avoid the above illness, all the community members perform *Pho Ta* worshipping ritual once a year, up to each family's defining period. The head of the families "communicate" with the guardian spirit himself, then perform the ritual typically to what has been done since the ancestral time for the happy lives.

It can be said that the belief of *Pho Ta* shrine has been passed down through the narrative - the story of ancestors or family members who encounter situations that are believed to be the power of the *Pho Ta* shrine that have been passed down through the family, such as encountering a large white snake in a rubber plantation. It is interesting that these tales are accepted by children. This is because their children also contribute to the rubber plantation career as well as their parents.

On one hand. It can be assumed that the villagers' fear conducts and orderly control their own deeds in the similar way: being afraid of snakebite turns to be snake worship and of violating *Pho Ta* tradition leads to the annual worshipping ritual. On the other hand, to pay respect to *Pho Ta* spirit indirectly educate people to feel gratitude for ancestors and supportive ones.

3. Cultural Transmitting Function

Not knowing much about natural phenomena but being necessary to live with the things, especially in hunting, wild-gathering or agricultural cultures surrounded by forests, human created supernatural worshipping rituals to serve their psychological needs: begging the supernatural power for prosperity and security of lives.

Owing to the Thai's agricultural culture, fertility becomes the heart of living. From the researcher's viewpoint, Thai traditions show how people submissively beg the supernatural power. *Pho Ta* shrines and corresponding rituals, likewise, has been originated from the same idea.

According to the information gathered and observed from field research, the ritual starts from shrine-building process to get rid of evilness before inviting *Pho Ta* spirit to reside in order to protect the plantation owner and his family along with bringing prosperity. Only this very first process is performed by a folk shaman; the annual worship is handed down to the head of the family or one who has raised the idea of

Pho Ta worship in that place. About the yearly worshipping ritual, it begins with food-offering as mentioned in the ritual manuscript: 1) a half-cooked chicken² 2) a bowl of spicy curry 3) a bowl of clear soup 4) both white and red boiled sweetmeats made from rice flour, coconut shred and jaggery called *khanom tom* 5) a bottle of local liqueur. It is noticeable that the food sacrifices of *Pho Ta* shrine reflect the abundance of life in the community. Because there are sacrifices of both savory food, dessert, including alcoholic beverages. After placing all foods in front of the shrine, incense sticks are lighted and put on the offering, a stick for a dish. Then, folk spells inherited from the ancestors are uttered for summoning deities from eight directions, inviting *Pho Ta* to the ritual place and asking the spirit for partaking the offerings. Importantly, the guidance knife has to be used in ritual performing along with chanting the following hybrid-Pali spell "*Gacchāhi mānimāmā / Gacchāhi mānimāmā / Maa-mae-ku-maa / Maa-pho-ku-ma / Maa-yut-maa-yu / Maa-pokpak-raksa / Buddhāṃ Saranaṃ / Dhammaṃ Saranaṃ / Saṅghaṃ Saranaṃ*."



Figure 1 The Use of Guidance Knife
source: Ouiskun, 2019

Buamanee (2019) the ritual performer, informed that the use of guidance knife to mow grass symbolically means to show the spirits respect whereas to cut on the offerings means to serve him while eating. During this process, a small amount of foods is shared in separate leaf- portions, both the solid and the liquid, for wandering spirits who are regarded as *Pho Ta*'s

attendants, as well. After the meal-presuming time for fifteen minutes, the performer politely asks for taking the offering off by uttering a formal wording to end the ritual.

It can be vividly seen from the above information that the ritual is held and strictly inherited in Ban Chiao Sai Community, typically as in the old days.

4. Identity Establishing Function

According to Royal Institute's Thai Dictionary (Royal Institute, 1982), the word "identity" is identified as shared characteristics of a particular group which distinctively differentiate the members from others, for example; physical appearances, languages, behaviors, etc., whereas Na thalang (2014) describes that folklore plays the significant role in identity establishing; it does not only support the collective needs of the community but also resist, reinforce and empower social network by gathering people when public rituals are performed.

Considering from the definition and description above, *Pho Ta* worshipping ritual functions as a method of Chiao Sai's identity establishing since the word "*Pho Ta*" is a proper name to "specify" the community guardian spirit cult in particular. The spirit, nevertheless, plays his important roles not only to be the guardian spirit but also to safeguard people's local ways evolving with the walks of lives; the distinctive belief and rituals are preserved till today, and "differentiate" this rubber cultivating community from "others". Interestingly, different from the contemporary outsiders' idea to select only the "best offerings", including the shrines, to any sacred spirits, villagers there uniquely build *Pho Ta* shrines from reusable materials like wood chips or rubber tanks in order to express their sincerity toward *Pho Ta*. This is the most eminent presentation of the community identity, other than the belief and rituals, for it reflects the villagers' social value upon self-sufficient living kept in the modern society.

² It is believed that to offer not only for *Pho Ta* spirits but also the wandering ghosts nearby who are regarded as his attendants, the unforgettable ones.



Figure 2 A Shrine Made of a Rubber Tank
source: Ouisakun, 2019

Examining from overall, the belief and rituals of *Pho Ta* spirit in Ban Chiao Sai Community influent the villagers in various aspects: to release psychological and social tension, to reinforce the community orders, to safeguard the guardian spirit cult itself and to establish the insiders' collective identity.

Conclusion and Discussion

Considered from the entire research toward *Pho Ta* shrines in Ban Chiao Sai Community, Tambon Khlong Cha-un, Amphoe Phanom, Surat Thani Province, four functions are found: 1) tension releasing function 2) social training function 3) cultural transmitting function 4) identity establishing function. First of all, since most of the villagers depend on rubber cultivating business, some particular problems like confronting with venomous animals or shortcoming of products, affect their mental stability so that *Pho Ta* becomes people's spiritual supporter. *Pho Ta* shrines, herein, are counted as permanent residences of the spirit as well as the society's spiritual sanction where ones make wishes upon safety, prosperity and security.

Secondly, the similar ritual processes affected by the community context; for example, problems from snakes, business uncertainty, etc., can be regarded as a social norm, which has been systematically passed on for generations. Moreover, the used of reusable material indirectly cultivates the social value toward self-sufficiency. The sense of gratefulness for ancestors or supportive ones is imparted in the worshipping ritual, as well.

Further about the third functions, it is found that the *Pho Ta* spirit worship does not only "educate"

people to deal with this folk wisdom influenced by animism, Buddhism and Hinduism but also become a body of knowledge itself. Ritual-performing processes are transmitted from the older to the younger, then leads to the community identity in the below paragraph.

Talking about the last point, the identity establishing function, the spirit's name-calling, the particular belief and worshipping ritual (along with its processes), and the use of reusable shrine-building materials for the expression of sincerity, reflects the concept of sufficiency economy and living in harmony with nature, and so on, seem vividly different from other guardian spirit cults of other communities. *Pho Ta* worship, therefore, is Ban Chiao Sai's identity that is worth to preserve and research.

Although it is just a local spirit cult of a community, *Pho Ta* worshipping ritual has its interesting characteristics along with the sense of respect. However, this guardian spirit cult is now confronting hard situations: the demise of aged people who know how to perform the special ritual, the new generation's occupational change due to changing social conditions in Thailand that resulted in rubber prices falling much more than in the past. And the inundation of modernity that affects people's thoughts. Regarding from this point, the existence of *Pho Ta* belief should be highly concerned.

Suggestion

Apart from *Pho Ta* of Ban Chiao Sai in this research, variation of guardian spirit cults exists in many rubber cultivating communities in Southern Thailand. Thus, the particular folk wisdom, beliefs and rituals should be profoundly studies, especially its socio-cultural functions and social values in order to find out how to preserve this interesting type of folklore in advance.

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