

## Local Knowledge and Beliefs of Traditional Funeral Rituals in Roi-et Province Thailand

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**Abstract:** Traditional funerals in Thailand involve many rituals and traditions. Funeral rituals commonly practiced in communities in the Province of Roi-et include rituals before death, the bathing ritual, hairstyle, insertion of money, coffin ritual, coffin light, sacred chants, ordainment of Buddhist novice, ladder ritual, popped rice, cremation site selection, shroud tossing, facial bath ritual, *Bangsakul* cloth offering, wooden flowers, suppressing the coffin and gathering remains. All rituals since ancient times have been influenced by Animism, Buddhism, Brahmanism and local knowledge of the community. These traditions are going through changes influenced by modernization, technology and globalization. Many of these changes can be seen in funerals that use crematoriums which are mostly located in the urban communities. Traditional customs and beliefs are still widely practiced in the more rural communities and in funerals that still use a funeral pyre.

**Key words:** Ritual, funeral, tradition, ceremony, local knowledge, Roi-et, Thailand

### INTRODUCTION

Funerals are an important part of every culture. The concept of sending the spirit of a loved one to rest in peace in the afterlife is very important and highly regarded in Thai society. Funeral rituals in different communities are slightly different from each other. This is mostly dependant upon what the community considers appropriate. But most customs are very similar. Animism, Buddhism, Brahmanism and local knowledge have always been the major influences in funeral rituals (Kaemjary, 1983). But currently modern trends, technology and globalization are making their mark. This interaction of cultural change is reflected in the funeral rituals that are practiced. It also reflects the community's level of intellectual advancements and adaptations.

The goal of this research is to analyze traditional funeral rituals that are still being practiced, what rituals have changed and why some traditional customs have disappeared.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research area:** The focus areas for the research are located in Roi-et Province in Northeast Thailand. Two communities located 50 km apart were chosen for the field study. They are the communities of Kasertwisai

District and Muang District. Muang District is located in the heart of Roi-et City and mostly uses modern crematoriums. Kasertwisai District which is less populated uses mostly funeral pyres.

**Data collection:** Data was collected from 2006-2007 from attended funeral services and documented interviews of 72 individuals who are actively involved in funeral rituals.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Traditional funeral:** Traditional funerals in Roi-et province are heavily influenced by Animism, Buddhism philosophy and Brahmanism. Sacred chants and sermons are recited throughout the ceremony. Specific chants are recited depending on the ritual or custom. Summarized below are the traditional rituals that are commonly practiced in Roi-et Province.

**Before death:** Before death rituals are performed on behalf of the patient's request. Many of these rituals are based on Buddhism doctrine. Rituals commonly practiced include the following.

**Kharn Chak Tod Bangsakul:** *Bangsakul* is a cloth left anonymously for monks to use for a robe (Preecha, 1989). It is also used as a ceremonial shroud. The ritual requires

that the *Bangsakul* cloth be wrapped around the patient. 4 white ceremonial threads are linked between the cloth and 4 Buddhist priests. The priests will recite the *Bangsakul* chant for the well being of the patient.

**Kharn Tuht Waen Taht Gum:** The severing of misfortune and retribution. The ritual consists of 4 bowls or cups, 4 medium size clay pots, 4 ceremonial threads, 4 knives and 4 Buddhist priests. The highest ranking priest must be the most elderly. In between the Priests and the patient are the cups and pots of water. The ceremonial threads are wrapped around the pot connecting the priests and the patient. After the priests have finished reciting the sacred chant, they will cut off the ceremonial threads. The bowls of water are taken out and thrown away or floated downstream. It is considered that all misfortune and retributions are gone.

**Kharn Kum Po Kum Sai:** The Bodhi tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) is sacred in Buddhism doctrine. It is believed that if a patient leans against a Bodhi tree, they will get better and be cleared of all illness. In truth not all temples have a Bohdi tree and the Bodhi tree is usually too large to use. Practical methods require a strong tree branch, with a prong. The patient leans on the branch close to the Bodhi tree and at the base of the Bohdi tree are sacred offerings of worship. The Bhodi tree, branch and patient are linked by ceremonial threads to 4 priests.

**The bathing ritual:** It is customary to purify the body so that the spirit may rest and reside in eternal bliss (Sumaet, 1990). Warm water is mixed with natural herbs and washed over the body in belief of washing away past sins. The herbs help contain the body's odor. Talcum powder, perfume and makeup are also used if needed. Then the body is dressed in reversed clothing to prevent the spirit from returning to disturb family members.

**Hairstyle:** In order for the spirit to forget the past and continue towards rebirth, the hair is parted down the middle, all the way from the brow to the back of the neck.

**Insertion of money:** Currency is inserted in the oral cavity of the deceased. Five Baht or 10 Baht coins are mostly preferred. Some funerals will also insert personal items such as watches, rings, necklaces and additional money in the coffin. It is to provide the deceased with money to pay for the fare to Hell or Heaven (Preecha, 1987).

**Coffin ritual:** Coffins are homemade from plywood and soft natural wood. It is never constructed before the person has passed away. After family members and friends complete the task, sacred chants are recited by

the constructors. The chants will ask for forgiveness and permission from spirits that dwell within the wood (Satie, 1988). Tobacco and guava leaves are sprinkled in the coffin before the body is placed inside. Tobacco will keep insects out while guava leaves help contain odors.

**Coffin light:** Kerosene lanterns are used and placed in front of the coffin. The lantern is maintained throughout the ceremony and is kept lit at all time. It is in belief that the light will tell the spirit where the body is and prevent it from wandering away.

**The Matica Bangsakul chant:** The chant is recited at least twice at the host's home. Before and after the body is enclosed.

**The Buddhism high doctrine chant:** The Buddhism high doctrine chant is performed after sundown. Four Buddhist priest will perform the ceremony from 18:00 to 20.00. The social status of the deceased will determine how many nights the chants will be recited. For a commoner it is recited for 2 nights. For a higher community figure it would be 3-5 nights. If the deceased was a Buddhist priest, then the reciting would be 50-100 nights.

**Karn Ngun Huen Dee:** Good house celebration takes place at night after the priests have left. Family members and friends will gather at the host's home and embrace in family celebrations. Children would play games and the elderly would tell folktales and entertain relatives. This ritual is in belief that it will reverse the misfortunes and sorrow during the funeral and give comfort to those in mourning (Sawing, 1996). It also provides company to family members who have to maintain the coffin light.

**Ordainment of buddhist novice:** Ordainment of Buddhist novice is done on the last day that the deceased is at the host's home. Belief is that the deceased would burn in hell if no relatives are ordained to lead the coffin to the cremation site. Male members of the family will mostly volunteer, but females can also be ordained as female Brahmins. There is no limit as to how many can be ordained.

**Ladder:** When the body has cleared the house area, the house ladder is reversed on all axes to confuse the spirit and prevent it from returning home (Boongerd, 2001).

**Popped rice:** During the coffin parade, popped rice is sprinkled along the trail. It is done to lure the spirit to come out and eat, reducing the burden on the coffin bearers. Popped rice is prepared by slowing skewing rice grains until the husk cracks.

**Cremation site selection:** The local community graveyard is usually used for the cremation rituals. Other locations include forest temples and the open wilderness. To make sure that the location is not occupied by other spirits, a raw egg is tossed to conjecture the exact location. The location is confirmed wherever the egg breaks. Then the coffin is paraded 3 times counter clockwise around the crematorium or pyre. Tapping of the coffin against the pyre or crematorium will tell the spirit that this will be their final resting place and then the coffin is erected above the pyre (Prasit, 2004).

**Shroud tossing:** The mortician is the only person allowed to remove the family shroud from the coffin. Then the shroud is thrown 3 times back and forth over the coffin. It is done to confuse the spirit from returning to dwell in it. Then it is donated as an offering to the clergy to sit on to purify it of evil and misfortune.

**Facial bathing ritual:** A facial bath is applied to the deceased. Only pure coconut milk is used. The milk is believed to be pure and unblemished. Washing with it will assist in providing the spirit with a satisfying complexion upon rebirth.

**Bangsakul cloth offering:** After the reciting of sacred chants and sermons, offerings of *Bangsakul* cloth are donated in front of the coffin. The amount of cloths donated depends on the number of participants from relatives and guests.

**Wooden flowers:** The blossoms are made from soft wood and crafted in the figure of a flower. It is a tradition adopted from Brahmanism custom that originally used logs thrown in with the body. The flowers are placed inside and above the coffin before cremation.

**Suppressing the coffin:** Two large wooden branches are used. Each branch is leaned from the side to suppress the coffin from falling off the pyre. It is interpreted as a preventive measure to ensure that no angry spirits are set loose during cremation. It is a necessity if the deceased was someone who engaged in magical practices.

**Funeral pyre:** Dried natural wood is used to construct the pyre.

**Gathering remains:** 3 days after the cremation, relatives will gather up the remains. The ashes are refigured onto a white cloth, board or banana leaf in the form of a person's body. The head section is pointed towards the west. The *Bangsakul* death chant is recited while the cloth is rotated until the head points towards the east. Afterwards the

priests will recite the *Bangsakul* life chant. The chants are to merit the deceased and provide a clear path for rebirth (Kunaporn, 1993).

### **The influence of modernization, technology and globalization**

**Kasertwisai district:** Kasertwisai district is located in the rural area 50 km away from Roi-et City. Most funeral ceremonies use a funeral pyre. Traditional rituals influenced by Animism are still practiced but there are noticeable changes to some of the rituals and customs as follows. Coffins are no longer built but are purchased from the local market. Simple coffins have been replaced with decorative designs and some have blinking electric lights. Formaldehyde is used to preserve the body instead of natural herbs. Kerosene lanterns have been replaced by a large candle and used to light incense. Diesel fuel and rubber tires are used to fuel cremations instead of traditional wood. *Ngun Huen Dee* ritual has turned into celebrations of drinking, gambling and watching movies. House ladders are no longer reversed because they have changed to permanent staircases. Cremation site selection is no longer performed due to the lack of wilderness land. All cremations are performed at the temple or forest monastery.

**Muang district:** Muang District is located in the heart of Roi-et City. Most of the funerals use modern crematoriums. The bathing and cleansing of the body are provided by local hospital services. Formaldehyde has replaced natural herbs. Respectful and civil attire are chosen so that an open coffin can be present during the funeral bathing ceremony. The hairstyle for the deceased is regular and formal. Money is not inserted in the oral cavity anymore, but instead placed inside the coffin. Regular wooden coffins are purchased at the local market and temperature controlled coffins are rented if required. One large candle is used for lighting in front of the coffin instead of a kerosene lantern. Kerosene's strong scent and smoke has made it unpopular. Chanting of the Buddhism high doctrine has been expanded to include 7 chapters. The *Bangsakul* cloth ritual has been expanded to match the number of donors. The highest offering is called *Pah Mahabangsakul* or Grand *Bangsakul* cloth which is donated by the funeral's chairman or guest of honor. The amount of offerings is organized from lowest to highest ranking priest. Two cremations are popular, one imitated and the other genuine. The imitated cremation is for guests who won't be attending the actual cremation. It is also that they will have a chance to place their respects of wooden flowers and candles before the actual cremation. The crematorium itself is powered by charcoal, diesel fuel or electricity.

**New editions:** Modernization and popular trends have introduced new traditions and customs to funerals rituals.

**Host:** The host or ceremonial master has replaced Buddhist priest in the responsibility to conduct all the rituals at the cremation site. These responsibilities include delivering speeches, announcement of events and procedures, reading of the deceased's biography, commemorations, announcement of scholarships and invite guests to place their respects of wooden flower and candle. The custom of having a funeral hosts has been adopted by both rural and urban communities.

**Funeral reed:** Funeral reeds made from natural and artificial material is a popular custom adopted from Christian traditions in Central Thailand.

**Dance performance:** Dance performances have been included in most modern funeral ceremonies where it can be afforded. There is a solo dance, followed by a group dance. Dance themes and styles include *Sida Lui Fai* and *Rum Chui Chai*. The performance is displayed in front of the coffin.

### CONCLUSION

Traditional funeral rituals in Roi-et Province of Northeast Thailand were influenced mostly by Animism, Buddhism Philosophy and Brahmanism. Globalization, technology and popular modern culture have brought changes and replaced many of the Animism beliefs. This is most noticeable in communities in the Muang District, which has mostly urban settlements and modern facilities. Funeral rituals in the Muang District have many rituals that have been adopted from central Thailand such as Funeral reeds and dance performances. But traditional ritual of *The Ngun Huen Dee* has been misinterpreted and is widely practiced with gambling, singing and drinking. Modernization has also brought about cultures

that are convenient, such as the bathing ritual and coffin ritual which have now all been replaced by services provided by the hospital and market. Many rituals such as the ceremonial site selection and the ladder tradition have now disappeared due modernization. Animism, Brahmanism and local customs are still widely practiced in the Kasertwisai District but Animism and local knowledge are being replaced by modern and convenient customs.

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