

Paper Title: ***Rocket Festival in Transition: Rethinking 'Bun Bangfai' in Isan***<sup>1</sup>

Name of Author: **Pinwadee Srisupun**  
Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology, Khon Kaen University, Thailand  
Advisor: **Dr. Yaowaluk Apichartwallob**  
Assoc.Prof., Khon Kaen University, Thailand  
Address & Contact details:  
Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University,  
Ubon Ratchathani 34190 Thailand  
Tel: + 66 45 353 725  
Email: pinwadees@yahoo.com, pinwadee@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

Every year from May to June, ethnic Lao from Laos and Northeastern Thailand hold a rocket festival called *Bun Bangfai*. Traditionally, rockets were launched in the festival to ask the gods, *Phaya Thaen* and the Naga, to produce rain in the human world for rice farming and as a blessing for happiness. The ritual combines fertility rites which are important to the agrarian society with the Buddhist concept of making merit. There is no precise history of the festival, but some believe that it originated in Tai or Dai culture in China's Yunnan Province. The province of Yasothon in Thailand is very popular for tourists who seek traditional culture.

We can see the changing of *Bun Bangfai* from the past to present which includes pattern, ideas, and level of arrangement and from the original ritual to some unrelated ones.

This paper presents a preliminary study about *Bun Bung Fai* in Isan focusing on Yasothon Province of Thailand case, not only because it is well known, but it is also an international festival clearly showing the process of commodification. How can we deal with *Bun Bangfai* festival of Yasothon especially the commodification process from local to global level? And from this festival, how can we interpret and understand Isan people's way of life?

The study found that the festival was full of capitalists, local and international who engage in every site. Also, the components of each parade came from different areas, some of them not related to the community. People who joined the festival might not relate less to the old tradition, however, there was some complexity of "value" and "cost" that overlapped each other. The idea about "Bun" among commoditized components of culture was particularly considered.

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## **Introduction**

This article presents a preliminary study about Bun Bangfai<sup>2</sup> in Isan focusing on the Yasothon case. Based on observations made on May 12 – 13 2008, the author aims to show the signs of self-contradictory consumerism by using a method of interpretation. These signs are derived from the local traditional festival as it is now more of a performance, rather than the ritual it was in the past.

The article is divided into five parts. The first part is about the changing aspect of Bun Bangfai. The second part presents an overall view of Bun Bangfai held in the Isan area. The next part focuses on Bun Bangfai held in Yasothon as it is the case study which reflects relating to commercialization. The penultimate section covers the commodification of culture and the confrontation of value and cost in Bun Bangfai and that is followed finally by the research conclusions.

## **Rethinking Bun Bangfai in Isan**

Every year from May to June, ethnic Lao from Laos and Northeastern Thailand hold a rocket festival called *Bun Bangfai*. Traditionally, rockets were launched in the festival to ask the gods, *Phaya Thaen* and the Naga, to produce rain in the human world for rice farming and as a blessing for happiness. The ritual combines fertility rites important to agrarian society with Buddhist conceptions of making merit. There is no precise history of the festival, but some believe that it originates with Tai or Dai culture in China's Yunnan Province.<sup>3</sup> (Srisupun, 2007)

Previous well-known studies concerning Bun Bangfai in Isan include those by Tambiah (1970), Keyes (1974), Suriya Samuttakup (1990), a Thai historian – Nidhi Eoseewong (1992) and Thai anthropologist – Akin Rabibhadana (1992), the latter of which was a case study of Bun Bangfai in Thailand's Yasothon Province. Rabibhadana suggested that the festival underwent a long period of change. From a local custom at the village level, it was transformed into a regional affair involving provincial level officials from the central government, and since then it has been promoted as a major Northeast tourist attraction. Rabibhadana argues that despite the fact that culture will continually change as the society and the underlying beliefs of its people change, the promotion of cultural events as tourist destinations in this fashion can alienate culture from the local communities who have invented and nurtured it. Further, both Eoseewong and

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<sup>2</sup> ‘‘Bun Bangfai’ is writ in various name, in this article I use as ‘Bun Bangfai’ as the Tourism Authority of Thailand use ‘Bun Bangfai Rocket Festival’, for Rabibhadana (1992) use as ‘Bun Bang-Fai’, Keyes use as ‘*boun bang fai*’ [some article use *bun bōng fai*], and some writ ‘Bun’ as ‘Boon’

<sup>3</sup> Many years ago, during the time when the Lord Buddha was born as a toad, Phaya Tan was very angry with the people. Phaya Tan decided to punish the people by withholding the life giving rains. During this time of severe drought, all the people, plants, and animals suffered greatly. As the drought continued, most of the living creatures died from lack of water. After 7 months, the surviving people and animals rallied together and went to consult with Lord Buddha, the toad. After much discussion, they decided Phaya Naki, the giant snake, should lead them into the battle with Phaya Tan. But, Phaya Tan was too powerful and defeated Phaya Naki and his troops. Buddha, the people, and the animals then sent Phaya Dtaw, the wasp, and Phaya Dtan, the hornet to engage Phaya Tan. But, once again, Phaya Tan defeated the attackers, returning them home hopeless for victory and awaiting unescapable death from drought.

Finally, Buddha, the toad, planned an attack with termites building mounds into the sky along which scorpions and centipedes would travel into the battle against Phaya Tan and his forces. Moths aided the offensive by destroying the wooden handles of the enemies' weapons. Phaya Tan was overwhelmed by the coordinated effort of Buddha's attack. Buddha accepted Phaya Tan's surrender under the conditions that he provide the rains immediately and in the future, if he should forget, the people will remind him by launching rockets, at which time he will start the rains. The songs of the frogs will inform Phaya Tan the rains are being received and when he hears the sounds of the farmers' rattan wind chimes attached to kites, he will know to cease the rains as the harvest time is soon approaching. [Yasothon Province, 2009]

Rabibhadana are careful to point out that tourism may be just one factor contributing to change, and they assert that Bun Bangfai ritual should serve the local people, rather than the people serving the ritual. (Srisupun, 2007)

We can see many changes in the Bun Bangfai rocket festival – for example, the materials used to construct the rockets have changed. Nowadays, PVC pipe replaces traditional bamboo. But there are also cultural changes, changes in the meaning and purpose of the festival, and it is those changes coupled with the changes in technology that I would like to address here. (Srisupun, 2007)

### ***A Homeland Identity Festival***

The Bun Bangfai is recognized as a central feature of Lao cultural heritage. In 2005, Phra Ajarn Chandaphone Mingsisouphanh, deputy abbot of a Lao Temple, stated during a presentation of Bun Bangfai at the National Air and Space Museum in Chantilly, Virginia “*This is a historic event that brings us recognition and visibility that we, all Laotians, can be proud of.*” (Srisupun, 2007)

Anthropologist Charles Keyes (1998) tells of the exhibit of the Lao-American’s Bun Bangfai at the Burke Museum of National History and Culture, Seattle in which the Lao community wished to exhibit something more than simply nostalgia, a remembrance of life in Laos, and so in 1994 they launched a Bun Bangfai event adapted for the Seattle milieu. Within Thailand, Isan people who have emigrated to Eastern or Central Thailand, conscious of their homeland, still choose to celebrate the festival. The event reflects both traditional beliefs and newly assimilated cultural elements. These examples show how Bun Bangfai is always prominent in Lao consciousness in contexts where they are enacting their ethnic identities. (Srisupun, 2007)

In Isan, Bun Bangfai is a very important occasion for those who have been away from home to go back to their home. It might be a better time than Songkran or the New Year’s festival for people to visit their family. The locals call their children to come and join in parades.

### ***From the Culture of Reducing Risk to the Culture of Making Risk***

The idea behind Bun Bangfai originally was to reduce the risk of a bad agricultural season by supplicating the gods. In the meantime however, with improved technology, the ritual has begun producing risks - physical risks - which have to date gone largely unchecked. The physical dangers inherent in the shooting of rockets become palpable every year, as accidents and negligence increase. Amateur rockets are unpredictable in their trajectories, and few if any safety precautions are taken. Wayward rockets pose a hazard to people and property, but few festival participants pay attention to the dangers, nor even take them seriously. (Srisupun, 2007) In every year, we hear news of people or places who were placed in danger from Bangfai shooting.

Locals believe that if a rocket lands on a house or other location, that house will be cursed with bad luck. The household must then perform a rite to ask the local spirits to lift the curse. Shooting rockets also poses a severe risk to airplanes that are taking off or landing. Air traffic controllers in Ubon Ratchathani have asked locals to cooperate by disclosing the exact date, time and place of Bun Bangfai festivals, but such requests have gone largely unheeded.

How can we deal with this? The Rocket festival is the ritual that people ask the rain god to ensure a good rice harvest. But, today, it is the culture of risk.

It has changed from the culture that tried to reduce risks [in the term of spirit] to the culture that now takes risks, risking lives, risking properties, and risking spirit.

The one thing that we can feel relieved about is that some places now have insurance. This is the new approach of the globalized world.

### ***Gambling Everywhere***

Bun Bangfai festivals typically involve a large amount of gambling, and sometimes the gambling itself becomes the main motivation for launching a rocket - such that sometimes rockets are launched during months having nothing to do with rain or agriculture. With increased participation in wage labor, the stakes of such gambling have grown, as have the socioeconomic risks involved in losing. Gambling has become a severe social problem, one which the government has been unable to address successfully. (Srisupun, 2007)

The origin of Bangfai ceremony is a 'fertility ceremony' which marked the beginning of the cultivation period of rice. Later, Bangfai relates with Buddhism as the idea of 'Bun' occurred and it was given 'Bun' as the name. It has to be arranged in the full moon of the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month as Visak Day. People also shooting rocket offerings to Buddha because they believe the toad in the myth is a new born of him in that era. All the activities of Bangfai will start at the temple. People go to make merit. And you can see the ordination as a part of that ritual. Nowadays, Bun Bangfai is less related to the ideas of Buddhism because a globalized world leads to change in social structure, especially the change from an agricultural society to industrial society and also the government policy of tourism. Technology used in agriculture is another important factor which reduces the relation between the religious ceremony of Bun Bangfai and the traditional request of rainfall. In the other words, the festival is now held mainly to conserve an old Buddhism tradition. Rabibhadana (1992: 27) said that it is an area for betting and advertising the ability to Produce Bung-Fai of specialized, commercial groups.

### **Bun Bangfai Performance in Isan**

We can see Bun Bangfai arrangements throughout every part of Thailand, with the exception of the South. In the North the traditional rocket shooting is called "Chi Bok Fai", which is held to worship the Buddha, not to directly pray for rainfall. It is not necessary for each place to hold this festival at the same time. Some places arrange to have it during the 9th lunar month, while others are held during April's Songkran festival or even during Loy Krathong's Festival.

In the West, the ethnic group - Tai Puan at Amphoe Bang Pla Ma, Supanburee province usually hold Bun Bangfai in the 6th lunar month to conserve the traditional belief that if they worship the god with fire, they will be rewarded with ample rainfall and fertile, rich farmland.

In the central region of Thailand such as Nakorn Sawan, and Petchapoon provinces, there are many Isan and Laotian migrants. Therefore, the traditional festival has been influenced by the Isan way of life.

In the East, such as Chacherngsoa, Prachineburi and Sra Kaew provinces there are also many Isan people. They would hold this festival on the 6th lunar month, particularly on Visakha Bucha Day in the middle of the month. The biggest arrangement is at Sri Mahosod district in Chacherngsao province which is set as the annual celebration by Tai Puan ethnics.

### **Bun Bangfai Talai Lan at Kutwa Sub-district, Kuchinarai, Kalasin**

At the Tumbol Kudwa, Kuchinarai District, Kalasin Province, where there is a large number of the Phu Tai ethnic group, the Bangfai Talai Lan is held in May. Bangfai

Talai is a round character, of approximately 9 -12 inches in length and it is shot at an obtuse angle, which is unusual for Bangfai. For Phu Tai culture, Pholdee (2007) explained that the Phu Tai Bun Bangfai originated in Muang Tang, Sibsong Chao Tai that appeared in Pa Daeang - Nang Ai myth. Its purpose is not only for Thean worship, but also for Pra Tat Ket Kaew Chatamane in heaven to ask for rainfall before cultivating rice seedlings.

### **Bun Bangfai Panomprai, Roi-Et**

Bun Bangfai Panomprai District, Roi-Et Province is one of the larger Bun Bangfai celebrations in Isan. The highlights of the festival include the launching of multiple rockets from dawn until early evening. It is held about 1 kilometer from the district.

In 2008, this Bun was held as a national contest for Her Majesty Chakree Sirinthorn. Panomprai people believe that Buddha's relic - Pra Tat Wat Klang Udon Vech is a place of Chao Po Maha Tat who protects the area, keeping it peaceful and helping those who honor him. Panomprai people construct Bun Bangfai to request his favor. Bun Bangfai is also designed to aid local people who work and study outside the area, to return back home. It uses the slogan "Rocket Shooting for Paying respect Pra Tat, Relatives altogether". Panomprai is a famous centre of Bangfai rocket making. Each local Bangfai group gains income from hiring out rockets to people who wish to fulfill their vows, and also from the rocket launching competition.

### **The Case of Yasothorn Rocket Festival<sup>4</sup>**

Although Bun Bangfai is held throughout Isan, the most famous is the Yasothorn Bun Bangfai which has been promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand since 1974. It has now become a part of Yasothorn peoples' lives and is associated with a Yasothorn Identity. A lot of signs of this identity are visible in Yasothorn town, for example at bus stops. Bangfai is part of the Yasothorn slogan and is also the company logo of Mam Jokmok, one of Thailand's top comedians who was born in Yasothorn. The important events in the festival's history are as follows;

In Yasothorn town, local groups have constructed the Bun Bung Fai for a long time. In 1966 it changed from being a local community organized celebration to a provincial performance controlled by the municipality. In 1974, the Tourism Authority of Thailand began supporting it, both financially and through promoting the event to a wider audience. Yasothorn Bun Bung Fai changed from being a local traditional collaboration into a town festival with cooperation from locals and was used to promote tourism in the area. In 1993, Japanese people from Yashida, Japan were invited to join the tradition after it had been discovered that the Yashida Ryusei Rocket Festival which takes place every year on October was similar to Bun Bung Fai in Yasothorn. Representatives and rocket from Yoshida town has joined the parade and rocket shooting since then. Yasothorn and Yashida towns weaved a relationship through the rocket festival exchange until January 13, 1999, when they declared the relation of twin cities. In 2006, the year of the 60th Anniversary celebration of His Majesty Accession to the Throne. Bun bung fai was held as an international festival to emphasize the greatness of Thailand's King. The Japanese parade and rocket also be a part of this international festival together with Mekong countries. In 2007, the The Ryusei International Exchange is one of a program Joint

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout much of Northeastern Thailand, the Thai-Isan Rocket Festival is held every year on May - June. This festival marks the beginning of the rice growing season. Rockets are built and launched into the sky to worship the god of rain, Phaya Tan. The people believe if Phaya Tan is pleased by their actions, he will deliver the rains necessary for a successful rice harvest. Yasothorn is known to have the most impressive rocket festival in all of Thailand which is arranged every year on the second week of May.

Festive Calendar for the 120th Anniversary of Japan - Thailand Diplomatic Relations which is established since September 1887.

#### *Festival Pattern*

Yasothon Bun Bangfai is held annually on the second weekend in May. During the week preceding the rocket launching, there is a temporary market selling local crafts and products and a general goods market. There are many activities as a part of festival such as the Bangfai beauty contest, an ancient drum contest and a cheerleading contest.

The festival is held on the main street of the town. On the opening day, there are nine KhumWat<sup>5</sup> parades, a parade of contemporary Bangfai, and an ancient Bangfai parade with displays from District representations, official organizations and also private organizations. On the second day of the festival, the rockets are launched. The first rocket is to request rainfall, whereas the others are purely for show. They include decorative rockets from Japan and the entrants in the rocket competition.

For tourists who wish to attend a rocket festival, the Yasothon Festival has both beautiful parades and a rocket-launch, but those who purely wish to see rockets, Bun Bangfai Panomprai may be a better choice. In Yasothon, because the launch base is very close to the town, there have been many houses catch fire in the past, so these days the Yasothon festival has reduced the number of rockets.

#### **Cultural Area: The Space for Commercial**

The Bun Bangfai was hold both for Thean worship and for God and Ghost worship which originally relates to it being an agricultural rural area. But since the area has become more urbanized, the Bun Bangfai does not relate to the traditional practice of requesting rainfall anymore. The performance may relate to the old ideas and nostalgic ideology but more than that, it is for commoditizing culture. So some people who want to continue the old ideas insist that the modern performance has no charm to it. For me, Bun Bangfai is more than a tradition. Aside from the tourism, there are a lot of signs showing that it is not only a myth or false consciousness of people, but it also reflects ideas of people who need to show their cultural identity in their own way.

#### **Performance areas**

The Jaeng Sanit Road is the main street where the festival is held. As in the past the parade will go around and gone out the cities. Because people believed that if the Bangfai come in the city, the bad things will come through. However, it was chosen by the festival's management for strategic reasons rather than those of historical importance. Not only is it comfortable to use an area of town hall, but it is also easy to promote to tourists who pass along this main street. Moreover, many businesses which are big festival supporters are situated along this street.

During the festival, there are a tent and grandstand for spectators. The official asking price is 100 Baht per person without fixed seat. So, the cultural space in this sense is extremely exploited for commercial gain.

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<sup>5</sup> *Khum* is used for calling each community in town.



Picture 1: The grandstand with 100 per person

### **The Components of the Parade**

Each Khum Parade consists of a beauty queen who carries the sign, the local dancing procession, tom-tom parade, review procession again with tom-tom parade and the Bangfai Ae vehicles.

The beauties of each parade are most from each Khum and the sign that they hold will the name of the supporters of that parade.

In the past the dancers of each parade were from the community, but now most of dancing procession is hired from outside. There are many dancing groups for hire, such as from Dancing Art Collage, primary school, or from the rural communities. The professional dancers are easily spotted due to their modern dance routines.

The tom-tom sub-parade in each Khum contains at least 2 sub-parades differing from the rural areas which contain only one. The Bangfai Ae vehicles are also hired rather than decorated by the Khum. In Yasothon, there is only one group in Khum Sritham who make a rocket. The other Khum purchase their rockets from outside the province, especially from Roi Et and Sri Sa Ket Province.

All of these factors illustrate that the components of the Yasothon Bun Bangfai is less related to Khum people now than before. It's only something called a "representation".



Picture 2: Applied Dancing Parade which is hired

**Added Parades**

In the added parades, the ancient Bangfai parade contains displays from nine districts and other private and official organizations. Each presents a way of life and good things in their areas. Most entrants try to present an idea pertaining to sufficient economy, which is promoted by His Majesty the king.

There is also a gay parade called “Iron Flower” which receives support from a local politician. In some of the dancing parades, gay men are the dance trainers and choreographers. The gay parade is also interesting for foreign tourists. I noticed that many tourists take photos with the gay performers rather than pay attention to the local dancing. The gay performers present their many good attributes, entertaining and showing their ability through Bun Bangfai. In this case, Bun Bangfai space is not a space limited to men anymore.

However, in my village, gay performers have played an important role in the parade for more than 20 years, such as being leaders of the dancing parade, designers of Ae Bangfai car but previously never as show girls like they do nowadays.



Picture 3: Gay in the Parade



The phenomena of rocket groups include getting drunk on big trucks with huge full option stereos. They take part in the parade to display their power, the power of the rocket and thus the strength of the rocket group. The rocket group displays this power in an attempt to intimidate the opposition. It is quite clear that the rocket-launch competition relates more to the individual groups' sense of power than to Thean worship. The trucks' trailers also carry huge signs displaying the name of their supporters, maybe large firms or important politicians who see this as an opportunity for publicity.



Picture 4: Big truck with big power

For the direct sell, there is a parade of motorcycles by corporations with slogans like “less down payment, pay by comfortable installments”. Another unrelated parade promotes the auction of license plates by the transportation government organization. These sub-parades clearly indicate that Bun Bangfai is exploited by both private and official organizations. Bangfai is now a sign of commercial consumerism.



Picture 5: Motorbike Promoter with slogan “less down payment, pay in comfortable installments”

### The Cheer Stage

I was shocked by more than 30 big cheer stages alongside the parade, which I saw for the first time although I am Isan and Bun Bangfai is an Isan tradition. There were full of noisy drunks, with music at more than 80 decibels, which can shake a whole car. This was especially unsuitable for young children. The roles of children at those stages were that of dancers, not to conserve or display culture. The locals told me that it has been like this since an incident 6-7 years ago where drunks slowed and almost stopped the Bun Bangfai parade. So, the officials decided to set up special stages for this kind of behaviour along the route. The stages are supported by income from many sectors; business group, politicians and the media from not only the Yasothon area but also from nearby provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani. There is also endorsement from the Mum Jokmok comedy team for almost every stage. Mum is famous and may be a sign of the humour of Yasothon and as a local star, his name is increasingly popular in Bun Bangfai every year.



Picture 6: Big Cheer Stage

In this case, Rabibhadana (1992: 22-23) explained that “Bun Bangfai has become an instrument which serves the political ambition of the business group and the economic interests of the *Khum* people. ... the festival provide an opportunity for the relatively poor urbanites to gain access to public funds and support from private enterprise.”

Moreover, the cheer stage is a sign of urban life that is a prototype which will readily extend to rural areas. They must have big stages – showing their importance and power.

### Bangfai Rocket

Although Yasothon is famous for Bun Bangfai performance, it is not as famous for the rocket making as Roi-Et or Srisaket province; there is only one rocket making group in Khum Wat Sri Tham. The shooting of rockets is limited because of the town area. There are less rockets launched than other big festival areas but the Japanese rocket showing is a special one. As an important ritual event there does not need to be many rockets launched, but for tourism there needs to be a variety of rockets launched. It is not enough to only show the rockets. Some local people who admire Bangfai shooting said there are too few rockets being launched these days. Gamblers too said there's not enough. Little rockets which are sold during the festival are from other provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani. The rocket group owner in town said that this is his second occupation but

some young people can gain income from it. He gives jobs to young men, so they will not partake in illegal activities.



Picture 7 Bangfai Shooting



Picture 8: Little Bangfai Seller

### **From Local to Global**

The International festival at Yasothon is making a difference which it cannot be seen in other areas. Tourism has encouraged the Mekong countries to join the festival as the Japanese have done. As Rabibhadana (1992: 31) points that;

“When cultural items are selected to become tourist attractions at national level, it gives much pride to the local population. All people in Yasothon, especially the Khum are very proud that their festival has been select as national tourism attraction.”

So, when the idea of “Go Inter” has arrived, it was emphasized to give Yasothon people a more great sense of pride in their hometown. The components of each parade come from different local areas, generating income for their local producer. The role of the urban people is to gather all the components and parade them for a global audience, becoming secondary producers. The festival can now be accessed that anybody can now see both

the ancient and contemporary festival. Whether these are true to the original tradition of Bangfai or not, locals and the tourist industry is benefiting.

Moreover, as an urban area, it is a center-point in the network between local and global. The components of each parade come from different local areas, generating income for their local producer. The role of the urban people is to gather all the components and parade them for a global audience, becoming secondary producers. The festival can now be accessed by people who don't have Bangfai in their blood, and anybody can now see the ancient and contemporary festival. Whether these are true to the original tradition of Bangfai or not, locals and the tourist industry is benefiting.

### **The Commodification of Bun Bangfai**

Commodification means the transformation of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships, relationships of exchange, of buying and selling.

Overall, the commodification of Bun Bangfai originated from the finding that it can sold through tourism. The official who plays an important role regulating cost and value of Bun Bangfai, has the specific task of adding value to Bun Bangfai for the tourist industry. The economic structure of urban life makes an opportunity for business groups to promote their products and also for the urban community to fulfill their festivals. The urban people change the traditional regulations into a form of entertainment such as on a cheer stage, on trucks, and at the review parade. However, urban people find ways to enjoy themselves, such as on a cheer stage, without needing to spend much money. Whether people are willing to change or not, Bun Bangfai is becoming a commercialized process. Each of the components are in competition with each other: the parade has to have the best dance, the Bangfai Ae cars need to be beautifully designed, the Bangfai should be safe and yet impressive. During the Bun Bangfai season, many Bangfai cars are visible on the road, and replica Bangfais are produced to be sold in the Bun. Bangfai was reproduced as a product of traditional culture. It is a special product that you cannot buy from the shops – unlike firecrackers. However, as I mentioned previously, Bangfai are reproduced for gambling and are sold throughout the year all over Isan from Bangfai group. It's possible to say that it's the local product for the illegal local market, but this market makes money for those who work in the Bangfai group. Bangfai makes a new occupation for those who are engaged.

So, the Bun Bangfai demonstrates the process of commodification, standardization, mass production and reproduction.

### **Cost and Value of Bun Bangfai**

*“Joining the Yasothon Bun Bangfai, I got a lot of merit.”* (“มางานบุญบั้งไฟโยสธได้บุญหลาย”) is a quote from an old women who joined the festival. It's a short sentence but there is something behind it.

Why did the old woman emphasize Yasothon? How did she know that she would get a lot of merit? Even though Yasothon Bun Bangfai is less associated with traditional ideals and composed more of commoditization of culture ideals, it is still a myth that makes people believe that they should come. Where does the merit in this case come from? Is it from Thean worship or paying respect to Buddha? Is it from an open cultural area that every actor can play a role on that? How can we deal with this?

Behind the sentence, the woman as a cultural consumer is not just consumer but she think she play a role as a merit producer which joining Bun could give to her. The ideology aspect is a main point for Isan people who join the Bun. They did not think about

the purpose of Bun Bangfai such as Thean worship as much but join the Bun is more important. So, the Buddhist in this sense is quite important.

In the part, function of Bun Bangfai is as other Bun that is to make a unity, people in each Khum will come to make Bangfai rocket, Bangfai Ae, prepare dancing parade, but when these are gone, Bangfai arrangement is limited in some group who be in the review parade. So, people just take the idea of Bun Bangfai and have changed the idea into their form.

Bangfai Ae car, Dancing parade which is hired from other province, Bangfai rocket buying from other area, little Bangfai which is not a OTOP of Yasothon province, these are not represent as local area but is presented as their own. All of sign is stress that which is should come from such as the best rocket may be from Roi-Et and Srisaket, the exquisite Ae car should come from Roi-Et specialist. But the best component is at Yasothon. So, we can see Yasothon as a *sign of "representation"*. And it's a *representation of "commoditization of culture"*.

Although, the value of Bun Bangfai is covered by the price and fame and the discourse of the winner, there are new rewards to be gained from changing from a traditional ritual into a festival, such as an opportunity to get more income from making components of Bun Bangfai and a strategy for urban people to join this Bun together. This Bun is a cultural capital both in term of social value and economics. So we cannot see it only as conservative tradition, but should see it as a changing tradition with awareness.

### **The Bun of God of the Evils: Merit or Demerit?**

Bun Bangfai was explained as a Bun of god of the evils. Eoseewong (1992: 5) explained that the reason why this is called Bun of god of evils is due to the iconic representation of the sexual organ. But other explanations relate to the large amount of alcohol, gambling and the brawl in the Bun Bangfai culture.

Bun Bangfai is a Bun in Buddhist tradition which means to merit, but many question as to why the performance seems to contradict this meaning. Why is this Bun a source of problems like gambling, accidents, and maybe even HIV/AIDs? (กองบรรณาธิการสารแมงมูน, 2550: 30 -32)

However, this was stated under the idea about the complexity of traditional culture and the way that was framed by society as a whole. There is a different way of thinking that we should understand each idea. Inside and outside man have differing views, Clausner (1987) the anthropologist, looks at the sexual signs as a main part of tradition, so he disagrees with the official idea of leaving that sexual sign out. However, he did not express an opinion on whether alcohol was part of tradition or not.

The idea about Bun of god of evils is emphasized through media and writing, stating that it gives the producer the right to act as they wish without being judged. Any activities which slip from normal life, such as intercourse, are not a sign of lewdness, but are sign of the culture. The drunk is not just drunk but is a cheerful and joyful. The gambling is a part of cultural not an illegal. The fighting between groups is normal and can be done in the area. This is a cultural argument which states that whatever is now seen as culture was emphasized by those practiced it until it was accepted.

### *Thai Health Promotion Foundation and Bun Bangfai*

There is also a parade put on by Thai Health Promotion Foundation, together with other official health organization to promote no alcohol and no smoking which seemingly contrasts the rest of the festival, as Bung Bangfai is a Bun of god of evils and in 2008 the main supporter was the Singha Corporations- big alcohol company in Thailand. Additionally, cigarettes are promoted pretty much all over the festival area. For THPF,

alcohol in Bun is a demerit. But this demerit is forgiven in this festival. THPF play a weak role against the unhealthy aspects of the festival, so the participants will not turn anti-THPF. But what will happen if THPF plays a stronger anti-bad health through this festival? They should think more and more if they want to do that.



Picture 9: Health Promotion Parade

*Whatever merit or demerit, good or bad, Bun Bangfai is self-contradictory but harmonized in itself.*

### **Conclusion**

Bun Bangfai is not only a conservative tradition but a reflection of urban Isan way of thinking. They make a choice for getting out of control of government which is acceptable. They use the way of commercial to fulfill their own need into a form of entertainment and support their Khum without pay by themselves. Because of urban life away from old ritual, people choose the easy way to conserve their tradition by hiring some components of parade. There are many contrasting aspects in the performance such as the idea of Bun of god of evils. However, from the media, we can acknowledge that locals and officials still repeat the old ideas of making merit, offerings to Thean worship, for the shrine of the city-god, and for the unity.

The changing of Bun Bangfai is a question for not only insiders, but relates to everybody. It's the question of how people live in this world and also how locals survive in this globalized world. The idea of commoditization of culture that reflects on Bun Bangfai may be a good case for integrating local into global as glocalization idea. Locals gain income from the arrangement of Bun Bungfai that occur all over Isan and other regional areas. People are proud to be 'international' and need more and more tourists to come to see their culture. We can see the regulation of officials, the breaking of some rules, and the win-win situation.

The original idea of Bun Bangfai is still being celebrated. The idea behind constructing the performance is changing. The original practice can still be shown together with the new practices. The exploitation of it is increasing and the economic, political and social participants from local to global benefit at each level. Many aspects from this Bun Bangfai have yet to be studied; many need more explanation and interpretation.

Genuinely, Bung Bangfai is a beautiful culture, which I think we should not take risks with. How the government communicate this point seriously to the locals and how locals act on this is still in question.

### **Recommendation**

1. The local government and the health promotion organization should cooperate to stop some bad health such as ‘no smoking’ by asking no pretty to promote cigarettes.
2. The local government should control the voice of stereo that suitable for kids to join the festival.

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