



The History of the Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival

- ⊕ The Thai word phansa refers to a period of three months in the rainy season during which time Buddhist monks are obliged to stay at one particular temple. They are not allowed to stay overnight at other temples during this time. The reason that monks have to stay at one temple is because this period of time is the rice-planting season and the farmers' crops are a verdant green. If monks are out travelling during this period, they may inadvertently step on the rice sprouts that have been planted, resulting in the loss of crops. The Lord Buddha therefore ordained that monks should stop their pilgrimages for a period of three months during the rainy season and that they must not stay overnight in a place other than their chosen temple. (Khao phansa means 'rain retreat' or 'Buddhist Lent'.) Khao phansa has taken place since the time of the Lord Buddha.
- ⊕ Khao Phansa Day is the first day of the waning moon of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, or during the month of July and extends for a period of three months until Ork Phansa Day which is the end of the period of time. Ork Phansa Day falls on the fifteenth day of the waxing moon of the eleventh month of the lunar calendar, or during the month of October.

(Note: The Thai calendar originally began in our month of December. Therefore, the eighth month is July and the eleventh month is October.) When monks stop their travels during the Buddhist Lent period, they have time to study, and they especially like to read. The best time for reading and memorising is during the night, which is a peaceful, quiet time during which it is easy to concentrate. In the past, when there was no electricity, monks used to light candles during the time that they were reading. When villagers knew this, they made candles to present to the monks, especially for presentation on Khao Phansa Day, a day on which they would receive even more merit than usual. Merit in this case means that the lives of those who present candles will be happy, healthy, enlightened and not gloomy. In other words, they will be people with wisdom, knowledge and perception, which is equivalent to the English word ‘bright’. The presentation of candles to monks on Khao Phansa Day is a Buddhist tradition which began in ancient times and still continues at present. However, present-day villagers tend to present electric light bulbs or fluorescent tubes as they are brighter than candles, are easier to use, and more convenient, and they still receive the same amount of merit!

⊕ The people of Ubon Ratchathani are the same as other Buddhists – when Khao Phansa Day arrives, they take candles and present them to monks. In the past, when it was impossible to buy ready-made candles, villagers would use beeswax taken from bees’ nests. They would melt the beeswax and then immerse a length of cotton to be used as a wick into the molten beeswax. Next, the wax would be left until it was cool enough to be rolled by hand, surrounding the wick completely.



Following that, the candles were cut to the required length and they were then ready for presentation to monks.

⊕ Presenting candles to monks in the past did not include a parade and candle contest like we have at present. It was just a presentation of candles along with other offerings to monks and receiving blessings from the monks, followed by the journey home. The reason that there must be a parade and a contest like we have today came about during the reign of Rama V, when the King’s grandson, Prince Sappasittiprasong, was made governor and came to rule over the Lao Kao circle, which was established in the town of Ubon Ratchathani. He saw the injuries and deaths that the

villagers suffered during the traditional rocket festival. The injuries and deaths were due to rockets that exploded and fell onto houses; other injuries and deaths were due to arguments and fights due to drinking excessive alcohol; sometimes it was due to playing with excessive energy in the mud; or, amusement with wooden dolls produced to look like they were making love. The Prince decided that these stories were bad, inappropriate, and ordered the rocket festival to stop, and for a candle festival with candles being presented to monks to take its place.



⊕ The candle festival in the time of the King's grandson, Prince Sappasittiprasong, involved the cooperative production of candles by villagers in each community (community, in this instance, means a small community group that is a member of a larger community. In each village, there were many small communities). Beeswax was collected, melted and then poured into a mould. After that, it was beautifully decorated and placed on a sedan chair or transported by cart. The candles entered the parade and then gathered together at the front of the town hall. When each community had gathered and was ready, the Prince would give prizes to the communities that had produced the most beautiful candles. After that, lots were drawn to see which community would present its candle to which temple. When each community knew which temple it would go to, the candle was paraded to that place. Therefore, the candle festival as we know it began at that time.



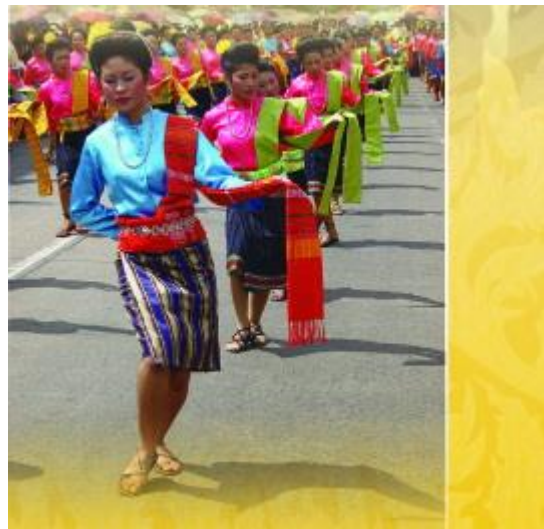
⊕ The candles that were produced by each community in the beginning were candles that could actually be lit and used. The size of a candle was the same as a bamboo tree trunk (because bamboo was used as a mould). Some communities produced candles as large as a banana tree. It all depended on the mould used and the amount of beeswax that could be found. The outer surface of the candle was smooth and shiny without any decorative carving. However, the candles were decorated with strips of coloured paper. The strips were wrapped around the candle or stuck to the candle. Some communities bundled small candles together to make a larger candle, or, in order to save money, would use a piece of rounded wood or pole as a former and wrap it with small candles. The candles were then decorated with paper so that the string used to lash the candles together could not be seen. (This method was the beginning of a new type of candle and they were for sale generally. It was a way of saving time because beeswax did not have to be boiled.

⊕ After many years having passed and with the involvement of competitions with prizes, the community that decorated its candle in the most beautiful and different way to other communities would normally be the winner every time. So, a new method of decorating the candles came about. It changed from being decorated with paper strips to being decorated with beeswax being cast in moulds and then attached to the candle body. This method produced a much more beautiful candle than when it was decorated with paper strips. Therefore, any community that decorated its candle in this way could expect to win first prize. Many years passed with candles being decorated in the same way. So, any community that wanted to win had to find another different way of decorating their candle. Hence, the carving of designs on the surface of the candles began, and the communities who were able to do this were likely winners. Once this new method of decorating candles so beautifully had developed into a variety of methods, it was the beginning of dividing the different types of candles into categories, and prizes were awarded for each different category. In the time that followed, there were two types of candles: the type with moulded beeswax attached to the candle body, and the type that was carved.



+

However, the two types mentioned above referred only to the candle body; there were no other major elements, especially the base of the candle, which was only produced in order that the candle would not topple over. The community that wanted to win had to find yet another way to decorate differently. This was the beginning of decorating the base of the candle in different ways, especially in decorating the base to make it look like it was floating. Animals from literature or stories from Buddhist history were depicted. Again, the community that could do this won. If one community copied another community that wanted to win the following year, they would make it much different or much bigger on a continual basis. It thus became a story in literature or Buddhist history that was perfected in one candle or one procession. Those who looked at the candles are absorbed, and received knowledge, and good feelings, as we can still see at present.



+

The production and procession of candles in Ubon Ratchathani has taken place for hundreds of years. Thus, a lot of development has taken place

too, as previously described. From the simple candle parade in the beginning, to today's dancing-, music- and acting-enhanced pageant. From the combination of the hands and energy of small groups of villagers in various communities in an economical way, to working with various groups of villagers, traders and civil servants in a more expensive way. From manual labour and transport on a cart, to transport on a motorised vehicle. From a small vehicle, to a large vehicle. From a large vehicle, to many vehicles. From a short vehicle, to a long vehicle. From prizes worth just a few baht, to prizes worth hundreds of thousands of baht. From administration solely by Ubon Ratchathani province, to administration in cooperation with the Tourist Authority of Thailand. From having no tourists, to having both Thai and foreign tourists. All of these various types of development have made the candles so different, so beautiful and so magnificent.



+ Through the cooperation of each sector, from the past up to the present, including government sectors, private sectors and various communities, today, the candles and the Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival Parade lead to honour, fame, and prosperity for the economy, society and traditional arts. Because of this, Ubon Ratchathani is well-known to ordinary people, both from Thailand and from abroad, and it can be counted as something to be very proud of for the people of Ubon Ratchathani.



Note

+ Although both the candles and the Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival Parade are magnificent, beautiful, exquisite, and pleasing to the eye, and there are many activities to take part in, it is already becoming repetitive for the people of Ubon Ratchathani. Because of this, the people of Ubon Ratchathani will try to think of new methods that are different in order to

introduce new, strange and exciting things to the festival. One new thing that has been heard of is to parade the candles on water. This is because Ubon Ratchathani is on the Moon River which is an important waterway and passes through the city too. The parading of the candles on water will lead to various new activities and methods, including both the procession and the production of candles. Another thing is the promotion of tourism by water. (Someone has suggested that the parade should be on water one day, and on land one day, with the procession beginning at Khu Deua beach and ending at Wat Dai beach. There should be floats, bamboo rafts, and boat racing competitions, together with other types of water craft, and with the boats carrying the candles as the central feature. The craft that carry the candles should be amphibious – on the water acting as a boat, and on land acting as a motor vehicle which can enter the parade immediately. There should be a competition for the parade on water as well as on land. Following that, the candles should be presented to temple adjacent to the river, for example Wat Supattanaram, Wat Luang, Wat Dai, etc.)

Article by : Head of National Archives Ubonratchathani
Mr. Peter Gadd : Translator