

# Symbolic Meanings of Frogs and Toads in The Myths and Rituals in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research article is to explore the beliefs and symbolism surrounding frogs and toads in the myths and rituals of various communities in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). By utilizing the concept of symbolic meaning theory and analyzing the language use in rituals and myths, this study aims to establish a connection between the characters of frogs and toads and human beings, as well as to identify the symbolic meanings embedded in folklore data. The findings of this research indicate that although frogs and toads are common creatures in nature, cultural narratives, myths, and rituals surrounding them are not ordinary. They are associated with supernatural powers, which are deeply ingrained in people's beliefs. Additionally, frogs and toads are believed to represent gods or sacred entities. They symbolize folk beliefs, Buddhism, rain, and abundance. Furthermore, they also represent various ethnic minorities in the region. Therefore, the symbolic meanings attributed to frogs and toads in the myths and rituals of ethnic groups in the Greater Mekong Subregion reflect the cultural significance they hold. These symbolic representations greatly influence the thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyles of the people within these communities.*

**Keywords:** *Frogs and Toads, Myths and Rituals, Symbolic Meanings, Greater Mekong Subregion*

## INTRODUCTION

Myths of origin such as the origins of the earth, the origins of human beings, the origins of plants, animals, and natural phenomena have long been a significant aspect of the cultural heritage of the Mekong Subregion. From southern China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, to Vietnam, frogs and toads are frequently depicted as deities, supernatural entities, saviors or symbols of good fortune in these ancient tales. They are often attributed with the power to bring fertility to human communities by creating water or rain. Additionally, frogs and toads are sometimes metaphorically associated with minority ethnic groups within larger societies. These amphibious creatures have been intertwined with human culture for centuries, as evidenced by archaeological findings such as ancient cave paintings. For instance, Huashan Rock Art in Guangxi Province, China, called “Pha Lai” by the Zhuang people, depicts the images of humans engaging in frog-like dances and frog symbolism. The residents of the area are mostly Zhuang people who share cultural similarities with the Thai Yai and Laos. Similarly, Pratu Pha in Lampang Province, which is an archeological site of ancient times, feature depictions of humans and animals imitating frog or toad postures in their dance-like gestures.

Moreover, large drums that are widespread in the Mekong subregion often bear frog motifs, sometimes called “Klong Kop” and are utilized in longstanding rituals. Another intriguing example is the frog-shaped stone carving at Kabal Spean in Cambodia, where it symbolizes the sacred presence of Lord Shiva (Museum Siam information). Some folk performing arts in some areas contain frog-like movements as in giant dance and monkey dance. Additionally, the ancient boxing dance postures in northeastern Thailand also have postures similar to the frog dance, which is commonly found in the Northeast of Thailand and along the Mekong River areas. One question arises: What is the cultural symbolism of frogs or toads in myths and rituals for the various peoples living in this region? The pervasive use of frogs and toads in rituals and mythological stories highlights their profound significance in the socio-cultural fabric of the Greater Mekong Subregion.

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**Figure 1:** Phaya Khan Khak (Toad) Museum tells the story of the history of the Bun Bang Fai Festival (Rocket Festival) and biological characteristics of frogs and toads in various countries. This building has 5 floors and is located in Yasothon Province, Thailand.

**Figure 2:** Red frog human paintings on the Huashan Rock Art, a World Heritage Site in Huashan Mountain, Nanning, Guangxi Province, China (photo taken by the author)

## Research Objectives

This research employed qualitative research methods and descriptive analysis to explore the symbolic meanings of myths and rituals surrounding frogs and toads among different cultural groups in the Mekong Subregion. The main research questions are: to what extent do these myths and rituals reflect symbolic meanings of frogs and toads, and how are these meanings interconnected with the social and cultural dimensions of the respective communities?

## Data And Scope of Study

In this research, our focus is to explore the symbolic meanings attributed to frogs and toads in the myths and rituals of communities residing in the Mekong Subregion. Specifically, we place emphasis on countries such as Southern China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The data was collected from myths, tales, and rituals originating from these countries, totalling 40 entries. To ensure the credibility and relevance of the data, we employed two criteria during the collection process. Firstly, we selected books that contained myths, tales, and rituals using the specific country's name as a keyword, for example Thai myths and tales, Vietnamese myths and tales, and Khmer (Cambodian) myths and tales. Secondly, we focused on myths and rituals that provided explanations for natural phenomena and the origins of things. For instance, we examined the history of the frog worship festival, the myth of Phaya Kan Khak (toad), and the myth of the moon-eating or the sun-eating frog, which are tales that have been preserved in written form.

The sources for our data encompass both oral and written traditions. We gathered information on frog and toad symbols from oral cultural practices and also referenced written resources pertaining to relevant myths and rituals. The geographical boundaries of our study were determined by the Mekong Subregion community, which comprises Southern China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. As a result of our data collection efforts, we accumulated a total of 40 entries: 15 southern Chinese myths, 5 Burmese myths, 5 Lao myths, 11 Thai myths, 4 Cambodian myths, and 5 Vietnamese myths.

## Data and Scope of The Study

This research paper examines the myths of origin, found in both oral and written traditions, originated from various countries in the Mekong Subregion, including southern China, where the Mekong River begins, as well as Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Detailed in this section is a comprehensive account of the names and origins of the frog and toad-related myths prevalent among different ethnic groups inhabiting the Mekong Subregion. The presentation of these myths will be organized geographically, proceeding from upstream to downstream areas.

## **Main Theoretical Frameworks**

In this research, several main frameworks and theories are defined to serve as tools for the analysis and interpretation of the symbolic meanings of frogs and toads in the myths and rituals of the Mekong Subregion.

*Theory of symbolism and meaning:* This theory proposes that animate or inanimate things can represent or symbolize other concepts or entities. Examples include scales symbolizing justice, the orb and scepter representing monarchy, the dove signifying peace, the goat representing lust, and the lion symbolizing strength and courage. Bulldogs denote strong attachment. Roses represent beauty. Lilies stand for purity. Buddha statues represent Buddhism, and the colors red and black symbolize prosperity, blood, and mourning.

The study of symbol systems in folklore involves understanding the meanings behind various symbols used by different groups to express their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. By exploring these symbols, folklorists gain insights into the true nature of society and the mindset of the people within it. Symbols within folklore, whether found in myths, stories, or literature, are creations of the human imagination.

Myths and symbolism are closely intertwined. It is almost impossible to ignore the symbolic aspects of myths. As Cassirer (1950: 30-34) said about the relationship between myths and symbolic meanings, "Understanding beliefs or mythological information is about understanding people's thoughts, which includes human emotions, sense impressions, and motor manifestations. The study of myths reveals hidden forces. To understand the meaning of a myth, we must turn it into a symbolic form. Therefore, the symbolic meaning in folklore is a combination between imagination, thoughts and beliefs and a concept. The symbols can be words or motifs. They can be known in general or personally, or known universally or locally.

*Language of myths and rituals:* This theory views myths and rituals as part of folklore information that provides insights into human nature and cultures in various societies. Although some may perceive these stories as unbelievable or nonsensical, in the end, myths and tales are created by human. Lévi Strauss (2014) proposes in *Myth and Meaning* that the analysis of language use in myths and animal rituals of indigenous peoples reveals meaningful forms of thinking that help explain their thoughts, beliefs, values, and worldviews. Myths and rituals remain present in modern society, serving as connective threads to social and cultural issues, even in the age of globalization. These traditions continue to play a role in creating meaning for future generations to contemplate in intriguing ways.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

We classify the related literature into two main themes: the study of myths and rituals from a folklore perspective; and the study of symbolic meanings. Previous studies on myths and rituals in Thailand use structural and content analysis, for example, Siraporn Na Thalang's (1996) analysis of the origin of the world of the Tai people, conflict and compromise in Thai myths, the work of Jaruworn (2004) or historical stories about King Naresuan the Great: Storytelling strategies and image creation of Sothip (2008), focusing on the study of myths telling, both in the origin of the world of the Tai ethnic group in various regions, focusing primarily on reflections of conflict or compromise. The tale of King Naresuan was analyzed in terms of language strategies and the image of the characters.

However, there is another approach to study myths which does not focus only on the text, but also on the social and cultural context linked to the role and function of myths, for example, the work of Kasempholkoon (2009) on the myth of Phra Sri Ariya in Thai Society: Creation and Role, The study of stories of myths linked to social issues or the role of myths in today's society has begun to be widely researched, such as the works of Hongsuwan (2005), Wiengperm (2007), Chailek (2015) and Anantato (2016). All of these studies mainly focus on textual analysis linked to the study of social and cultural context. However, there is a lack of in-depth research on the issue using theoretical concepts regarding symbolic meanings in the content of myths and rituals in the Mekong Subregion.

Next, we will present the meanings of frogs and toads as symbolic entities in various studies both from Western and Asian cultures. Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1989) compiles content from folktales worldwide, providing insights into the motifs present. However, the index primarily focuses on

European tales (English, French, Baltic, Estonian, Finnish and Norwegian), East Asian tales (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) and African and Native Indian tales, lacking a significant representation of Southeast Asian tales.

Furthermore, symbolic interpretations of frogs and toads in cultural dimensions are often brief descriptions found in encyclopedias or specialized dictionaries such as *The Encyclopedia of Religion* by Eliade (Ed.) (1995) and *Dictionary of Folklore* by Pickering (1999). These references provide insights into the cultural significance of frogs and toads, with a predominant focus on European and American regions. Studies specifically examining frogs and toads are usually scientific and focus on their natural characteristics, including origins, species, habitats, diet, and reproduction. Examples include works by Moler (1994) on frogs and toads and Siegal (2021) discussing the differences between frogs and toads.

Regarding rituals associated with frogs, some studies have explored frog symbolism in the cultural practices of the Zhuang people in Guangxi Province, China. For instance, Bohai (2018) presents "The Origin of the Frog Totem in Guangxi". In this paper, the Frog Festival, called Maguai in Zhuang language, is considered the reincarnation of a god. It is believed that this god has been in existence since Ancient Egypt. Song (2015) researched the Zhuang people's Maguai festival, which venerates frogs as auspicious beings representing abundance. This research discusses the cultural background of Zhuang people, the origin and the heritage of this festival to these days. Similarly, Wang (2022) investigated the cultural meaning of the Zhuang people's Frog Festival. It was found that frogs are revered for two reasons: 1) to ensure rain and bountiful harvest, and 2) to continue the survival and reproduction of the Zhuang ethnic group. Notably, some Thai scholars have explored the Zhuang people's frog worship rituals, albeit briefly. Srisak Valliphodom and Wongthet, P. (1993) mentioned the Zhuang people as the oldest Thai tribe, touching upon their rituals related to frog worship.

Another recent study by Ya (2018), titled "Social Capital in the Frog Festival of the Zhuang in Baying Village amidst the Expansion of Cultural Tourism," focuses on changes occurring in the Frog Festival in Pa Ing Village, located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. This study examines the concept of social capital in the organization of the Zhuang Frog Festival within this community and is a master's thesis from the Department of Mekong Studies at Khon Kaen University.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed primarily consists of perspectives from Western and South Asian scholars. There is a lack of studies analyzing and interpreting folklore data, including myths and symbolic rituals, pertaining to frogs and toads within the cultural dimensions of the Mekong Subregion communities. Consequently, specific studies on cultural data related to frogs and toads in Southeast Asian regions such as Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam are currently missing. This research aims to contribute to expanding understanding and providing clearer perspectives in our increasingly interconnected world.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Within the rich cultural tapestry of the Mekong Subregion communities, animals hold a significant place, often assuming symbolic roles in myths and rituals across various racial and ethnic groups. These representations exemplify the deep-rooted belief systems and connections between humans and the animal kingdom. Notably, the lizard embodies the Ahaya, the ancestral spirit of the Kui people in Surin province. The monkey symbolizes the revered deity Heng Jia among the Thai-Chinese populace in multiple regions (Charipas, 2004). Furthermore, the tiger represents the god Kari, worshipped by the Siamang tribe residing in southern Thailand and Myanmar (Srisawat, 2002). The turtle, in the Hokkien Chinese beliefs, embodies good luck and auspiciousness. In Guangxi Province, China, frogs are associated with the water and rain deities of the Zhuang people. Indeed, frogs and toads frequently feature in the captivating narratives, myths, and rituals of the Mekong Subregion inhabitants. As Walens (1995: 291) affirms, animals hold an integral role in the beliefs and religions of human culture, serving as vital conduits to divine or supernatural forces. This universal perception is echoed by the diverse peoples of the Mekong River Subregion, underscoring the pivotal status and significance of animals in their myths and rituals.

To delve deeper into the symbolic meaning of frogs and toads within the myths and rituals of Mekong Subregion communities, we will address the following key points: 1) Frogs and toads as embodiments of gods

and sacred entities 2) Frogs and toads as representatives of both traditional beliefs and Buddhism 3) Frogs and toads as emblems of rain and fertility 4) Frogs and toads as symbols of the minority and ethnic groups. Detailed explanations are as follows.

### **Frogs and Toads as Embodiments of Gods and Sacred Entities**

In various myths across the Mekong Subregion, these mythical tales often revolve around celestial phenomena, such as the moon, the lunar and solar eclipses. One such myth portrays a frog living on the moon alongside a rabbit and the moon goddess. This frog, out of anger, gradually devours the moon, resulting in a lunar eclipse known as the "moon-eating frog" in Vietnamese and Thai folklore. Similarly, the Zhuang ethnic group also has a myth featuring a toad residing on the moon, spewing out a portion of the moon during the first half of the month and consuming it during the latter half, causing the moon to wax and wane. The Zhuang people hold a Frog Festival during the Chinese New Year, celebrating and honoring frogs with grand rituals, including drumming, singing, and dancing (Tang, 2019: 39). In some Chinese cultures, the moon is sometimes envisioned as a giant toad, capable of expanding and shrinking, attributing to the phases of the moon. The pattern we see on the moon is the pattern of a toad. This depiction signifies the perceived power and mystique of these celestial creatures, as they are regarded as divine or supernatural beings capable of influencing natural events that humans fear like lunar and solar eclipses. This notion resonates with the Sanskrit myth of Bheki, a woman of exceptional beauty who is also symbolically tied to the sun.

It should be noted that the perception of the moon's image resembling a frog is not limited to Thai and Vietnamese cultures but is also found in Chinese, Indian, and ancient Greek traditions. In Chinese folklore, it is believed that the frog resides on the moon alongside the goddess Chang Er. Similarly, in some Indian mythology, there is a belief that the god of fortune, in the form of a golden frog, dwells on the moon (Thompson, 1989). Ancient Greek and Egyptian myths about Heqet who was the deity of fertility and childbirth, was often described as a frog. Across these diverse cultures, the frog symbolizes abundance and is revered as a deity by ancient civilizations.

Gray (2021: 149) suggests that in ancient times, there was no clear distinction between humans, animals, and gods as separate entities. Instead, all living beings were viewed as interconnected. There was no such things as animal kingdoms. Texts dating back to Pharaoh Shabako's reign (Shabako, 710-702 BC) describe that the heart and the tongue of Ptah (the Creator) is present in every god, human, animal, and living creature. Animals, just like humans, were seen as creations of the divine. They worshipped God and in return, they were cared for accordingly. In some cases, animals were even believed to have a closer bond with God than humans. Therefore, the belief in frogs and toads signifies the profound connection between these animals and the divine, reflecting the sacredness ingrained in their cultural significance.

Frogs and toads play a significant role in this group of myths, highlighting a common theme that portrays them as representations of femininity. Across various traditional beliefs of different communities in the Mekong Subregion, frogs and toads are depicted as living creatures that coexist with male humans. They are depicted as frog ladies in Myanmar folklore, grandmother frogs, mother frogs, and frog princesses in Zhuang myths, Nang Uthai Devi and Phra Ruang-O Ruang in Thai myths. Countless humans or cultural leaders are said to have been born from frogs or toads, with some living secretly within their bodies before transforming into influential figures. These characteristics reflect the beliefs prevalent in the Mekong Subregion that humans are an integral part of nature, with frogs and toads serving as a medium of connection. They also reflect the fundamental traits of ancient Southeast Asian cultures, which placed great importance on women. Traditional myths frequently depict human women ascending to heavens alongside rabbits or frogs and toads, all of which are female. In contrast, males are portrayed as ordinary beings without significant influence or power. This characteristic suggests that frogs and toads hold the role of nurturing mothers capable of giving birth, indicating the possibility of a societal structure once dominated by women. The status of frogs and toads, representing the female gender, is superior to that of humans, representing the male gender.

## **Frogs and Toads as Representatives of Folk Beliefs and Buddhism**

Folk beliefs encompass the religious beliefs associated with the influence of sacred entities, predating the adoption of Buddhist beliefs. These belief systems often involve supernatural powers, ghost beliefs, and beliefs about human spirits (Valliphodom, 1991: 19-21; Nathalang, 2002: 8-44). Over time, these traditional beliefs have interacted and intermingled with other belief systems that were introduced later, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, leading to cultural exchanges and borrowings. According to Chantawanich, S. and Sathanand, S. (1996:153), the folk beliefs held by the Thai people are considered to predate the influence of Indian culture, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Among these beliefs, the belief in ghosts is one of the most prominent.

If we delve into the myths and rituals of the people in the Mekong Subregion, we will discover the significant role of frogs and toads as representatives of the ethnic population or those who are considered human ancestors. Various cultures have incorporated beliefs about frogs, such as the tale of the moon-eating frog from the Tai Dam people in Vietnam. According to this myth, after a devastating flood, the world stood empty except for a human woman and a surviving frog. Similarly, the Guangxi Zhuang people believe in the existence of frogs on the moon, alongside toads, rabbits, and the goddess Chang Er. These beings have transformed into lunar deities highly revered by humans. Therefore, frogs and toads play crucial roles in myths and rituals, as they exemplify creatures whose physicality is rooted in the natural world. Symbolically, they reflect stories associated with nature and the cosmic order. Sometimes, frogs and toads are regarded as symbols of ancestors and supernatural powers, intertwined with concepts of sacredness, gods, ghosts, and spirits. The essential role they play in myths and rituals may shed light on the communal nature of human society. As Geertz (1973) suggested, "Symbols associated with the sacred encompass intricate meanings and embody principles and values that define and indicate proper social order." Therefore, the presence of frogs and toads in myths and rituals, as animal characters, also demonstrates their connection to social structures.

An examination of myths and rituals among ethnic groups in the Mekong Subregion reveals that frogs and toads hold symbolic significance linked to indigenous culture and prehistoric time. Within this group, numerous myths depict frogs and toads as creatures who resided in the region before humans arrived. Additionally, Thai Jataka stories depict frogs and toads, with the Buddha himself being born as a frog in stories like Haritamat Jataka. Another story, titled "The Green Frog Judging a Case," (Dhamma Council, 2010: 587) recounts how the Buddha took the form of a green frog to resolve a dispute. In this tale, humans were clandestinely catching fish in the river, and many fish became trapped in a gin. A snake, intending to devour the trapped fish, entered the gin. The fish united to attack and wound the snake, leaving it defenseless. At that moment, the green frog climbed onto the gin and the snake asked the frog: "Was it right for the fish to attack me?" The green frog affirmed the fish's actions as just, reasoning that the snake had trespassed the fish's domain. Having settled the case, the fish swiftly escaped the trap, leaving the snake trapped and ultimately perishing. This narrative is akin to the myth of Phaya Khan Khak, a prominent folk Jataka story in the Northeastern region of Thailand. Phaya Kankhak, the toad, is the central figure in this tale and represents one reincarnation of the Buddha or a Bodhisattva who aids and supports humanity during hardships.

The symbolism of the frog representing Buddhism can be found in the myth of the frog's footprint in Lamphun province, Thailand. According to the myth, there was a family with four sons who became buffalo herders after their parents passed away. One day, while tending to their buffaloes, they engaged in a conversation about their aspirations if they were to be reborn. The youngest son expressed his desire to become a Buddha, free from all suffering. The third brother playfully suggested offering the Buddha's excrement as an offering, and the second brother jokingly mentioned giving the Buddha hair from his buttocks. The eldest brother scolded them for mocking the younger brother's thoughtful response. In their next reincarnation, the eldest brother reincarnated as a King frog guarding a lotus cluster, the second brother became a peacock, and the third brother was born as a queen bee. The youngest brother, who had a charitable heart and practiced Dhamma, was born as an offshoot of Phutthakura, continuing to embody the Buddha's virtues. The third brother, as a queen bee, provided wax for making candles used in worship, while the beautiful tail feathers of the second brother, the peacock, were plucked as fans in religious ceremonies. The eldest brother, now the frog, remained unaware of the value of lotus flowers and met his demise when a

hunter accidentally killed him while trying to fix him to the ground. To honor his memory, a frog-shaped footprint was constructed as a memorial to be visited by those with faith. Additionally, a frog-shaped stucco statue serves as the gatekeeper and protector of the main Buddha image at the Suan Tan Temple in Nan Province, Thailand.

Furthermore, another myth exists regarding the origin of the Zhuang people's Frog Festival. It tells the story of Mr. Li, who took in a frog that refused to leave him during a rain ceremony. After 49 days, the frog transformed into a young man. Mr. Li named him Long Wangbao. One year later, Long Wangbao fought and defeated an invading army and married the emperor's daughter. However, the Queen Mother disliked the frogskin shirt that Long Wangbao always wore so she asked a maid to steal his shirt which led to his unfortunate death. In remembrance of him, the emperor ordered the annual celebration of the Frog Festival from the end of January to the beginning of February. The festival includes activities such as frog drums, singing, masked dancing, and adorning the body with frog-like appearance, all representing the Zhuang nation. This is one of the most unique customs of Zhuang people. Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (cited in Wisuttalak, 2017:13-14) suggests that certain animals' appearances or behaviors help explain unresolved conflicts in human relationships with the natural environment. Rituals and performances featuring animal masks are connected to beliefs in supernatural powers and ancestral spirits, serving as a means to ward off anxiety and alleviate suffering.

Moreover, frogs and toads are believed to bring complete happiness to human life. Myths and rituals depict these creatures as possessing supernatural powers that can either benefit or harm humans depending on their behavior. If people conduct themselves ethically, frogs and toads can bring prosperity, happiness, and fulfillment. For example, the myth of the Little Frog Lady of Myanmar tells the story of a frog who assists the prince in various matters, ultimately helping the prince ascend to the throne. The lady frog then transforms into a princess and marries the prince. Frogs and toads, therefore, hold a significant place in folk beliefs as representations of supernatural abilities.

### **Frogs and Toads as Representatives of Rain and Abundance**

Humans have diverse ideas and beliefs, encompassing both living and non-living entities. One prominent belief pertains to animals, which is found across numerous societies and cultures. Different societies hold distinct beliefs regarding animals, and all creatures have, throughout history, played a role in rituals, myths, and folktales across various cultures. This characteristic reflects human curiosity about other living beings that coexist in our world, such as frogs, with their amphibian lifestyle and luminous skin. Frog stories have long occupied an important place in world myths and folklore. Many folk beliefs and traditions surrounding frogs are intertwined with the weather, particularly rain. For instance, Native American cultures hold great reverence for the frog spirit, while in other societies, frogs are sacrificed or treated with high respect in the belief that it will bring seasonal rain. Meanwhile, there is a European superstition that a frog's skin appears shiny during good weather and dull before rain, and the sound of frogs' chorus is associated with rainfall (Pickering, 1999: 114, Kiriboon, 2006: 185-186). Consequently, it is believed that frogs descend to earth with the falling rain.

Frogs and toads are similar-looking amphibians, but they have a distinctive difference—the bumpy skin of a toad, which not only appears unattractive but also contains numerous toxins. Frogs, on the other hand, possess skin with mucous glands that keep it shiny and moist. Both these creatures are closely associated with rain, as evidenced in the myths and rituals of various peoples in the Mekong Subregion. For example, the Zhuang ethnic group in southern China reveres and worships the frog as the god of rain and harvest, seeking its blessings through a ceremony before the farming season. A similar myth exists among the Thai people in the Northeast, wherein Phaya Khan Khak (the toad god) battles with Phaya Than Luang to release rainwater onto the human world. Similar narratives can be found in Vietnamese myths, such as "Uncle Toad of Heaven" or the story of "Grandfather Toad and the King of Heaven," which depict a toad leading a human army in a fight against the gods in the sky to bring rain to the earthly realms. This theme is also present in Cambodian myths like "The War between the Toads and Brahma." Hence, the images of frogs and toads are intrinsically connected to nature and are associated with sacred or supernatural powers that control water and rain.



These observations align with the viewpoint of Wongthet, S. (2008: 50), who suggested that “primitive societies approximately 3,000 years ago believed that frogs or toads possessed supernatural powers capable of inducing rain. Consequently, frog images were placed on the front of grand drums, and worshiped through various rituals, such as people painting patterns on their bodies and limbs resembling frog skin, or assuming the role of frogs in frog-worship ceremonies. This can be observed among the Zhuang ethnic group in Guangxi Province, China, and similar beliefs and practices can be found in other regions, like the worship of Phaya Khan Khak (the toad) by communities living along the Mekong River. This tradition also extends to lighting rockets to invoke rain in village communities, including those in Sipsongbanna, China.”

The toad is revered as a symbol of rain, responsible for bringing abundant water to the human world. This belief is reflected in the Thai myth of Phaya Khan Khak, which recounts a time when the god of rain, Phaya Tan, became infuriated with humans and withheld rain, causing havoc and loss of life. In response, the animals united and devised a plan to defeat Phaya Tan, with the toad king, Phaya Kankhak, leading the way. The animals strategically utilized termites to construct mounds leading the animal armies to Phaya Tan's city, while the moth chewed off the wooden handles of Phaya Tan's weapons. Scorpions and centipedes, hidden among Phaya Tan's troops, unleashed their venom. Eventually, Phaya Tan surrendered and entered into a peace treaty with the Toad King. According to the agreement, if a human launched a rocket into the sky, Phaya Tan would be compelled to make it rain. Additionally, the sound of frogs' crying would indicate rainfall. Thus, the rocket became a symbol of requesting rain from Phaya Tan, while the sound of frogs and toads informed farmers of the abundance of rainfall. This myth indicates a pivotal role of the toad in the symbolism of granting rainfall upon human.

Similarly, in Zhuang culture, there are myths that highlight the role of frogs in bringing rain. One myth “The wise frog and the dumb emperor” depicts a clever frog who possessed the ability to call on the wind and rain. The emperor, fascinated by this remarkable skill, sought to learn it and traded his dragon robe, a symbol of his emperorship, for a frog's leather jacket. This exchange granted the emperor the power to summon rain. Another Zhuang myth “The seventh brother and Mr. Frog” tells of a village suffering from drought. One day, an old man who has seven daughters encountered a frog disguised as a man. He told the old man that he can summon rain. He then proceeds to chant the frog cry which promptly caused rainfall. In gratitude, the old man offered one of his daughters in marriage to the frog.

It is worth noting that the Zhuang ethnic group, residing in southern China neighboring the Mekong Subregion, has a ritual called the Maguai festival, centered around frog worship. This festival, practiced by Zhuang communities along the Hongshui River in Guangxi Province, China, involves villagers dressing as frogs and performing folk dances and drumming to seek rain for bountiful crops and prosperity. *Maguai* is a Zhuang word meaning “frog”, which is a sacred symbol of the god of rain. In Northeastern Thai culture, there is a tradition of performing ceremonies dedicated to Phaya Kan Khak (the toad god) during times of drought. These ceremonies are intended to communicate with Phaya Than, the Lord of Rain, and request rainfall for the earth. The association between frogs and rain in the cultural dimensions of Mekong Subregion communities highlights their significance as symbolic animals, possessing the power to bring rainfall and abundance of water. This connection is further reinforced by a popular Thai children's song that links the cries of frogs to rainfall. The song goes “*Oh rain, why do you fall? Rain falls because of the frog's cry. Oh frogs, why do you cry? Frogs cry because of the rain*”. This recursiveness of the anecdote shows the connectedness between frogs and rain. However, it is worth noting that in some ethnic groups' cultures, frogs are sacrificed as offerings to appease thunder gods and request rain, as it is believed that the gods dislike the sound of frogs.

Moreover, frogs and toads appearing in various ethnic myths are also associated with sexual desire. In the Thai myth of Phra Ruang-O Ruang, Naga's daughter had an affair with an earth snake and became pregnant. She discarded the blood glands on the shore of a river. One toad came across the blood spit and consumed it. It then symbolizes the sexual desire or lust of the Naga's daughter. This narrative echoes the myth of the origin of Phra Ruang of Sukhothai, illustrating the connection between frogs and toads and their association with sexuality.



These stories, myths, and rituals reflect the multifaceted symbolism attributed to frogs and toads within the region's ethnic groups, encompassing themes of rain, abundance, sexuality, fertility, and prosperity. Sexuality is often associated with fertility and abundance. Thus, frogs and toads representing sexuality can also be compared to its symbolism of abundance.

### **Frogs and Toads as Representatives of Minorities and Ethnicities**

Through researching the stories, myths, and rituals of the people in the Mekong Subregion, evidence suggests that the Guangxi Zhuang people worshipped frogs as gods and ancestors. They referred to the frog god as "Grandma Frog" or "Ma Guai" in the Zhuang language. Similarly, the Vietnamese myth referred to it as "Grandpa Toad" or "Uncle Toad," while the Burmese referred to it as "Nong Nang Kob Noi", which is a nickname that signifies respect and kinship with this community. It is also observed that the frogs and toads mentioned in these myths likely represent indigenous people who resided in the region before it became a country or state. This belief in animism and worshipping symbolic animals predates the adoption of Buddhism in the area. Over time, Buddhism was embraced, yet the original practice of worshipping symbolic animals, including frogs and toads, was maintained. These creatures hold sacred significance in the Buddhist world, as exemplified by the transformation of Phaya Kankhak into a Bodhisattva.

Archaeological evidence, such as prehistoric cave paintings, illustrates the beliefs held by various ancient groups of people. These beliefs encompassed ghosts, elves, naga, as well as symbols of frogs and toads. The widespread worship of frogs among the Zhuang ethnic group is a form of belief deeply ingrained in the Mekong River Basin cultures. Frogs and toads hold multiple meanings, including their association with supernatural powers, influencing the thoughts, minds, and actions of the people within society (Firth, 1973: 29). For instance, Dercheim's (1976) research explained the totem symbolism, represented by plants and animals, serve as the foundation of religious beliefs, representing revered gods and societal principles. Meanwhile, totems represent attachment and sense of belonging which is a form of social principle.

Beliefs surrounding frogs and toads in the cultures of the Mekong River Basin date back to ancient times when humans first encountered and revered these amphibians as deities. These beliefs have persisted across the region's many nations, including India and China, especially in the Mekong Subregion communities.

The Zhuang people, among others, associated the patterns on the moon with frog and toad skin patterns. The moon was regarded as a large contracting frog or toad, playing a role in its waxing and waning. Additionally, frogs and toads were seen as similar to gourd fruits, which have significant cultural importance in the Mekong basin's human races. As such, frogs and toads were worshipped as rain gods and providers of bountiful crops. Frogs and toads like to eat insects and fish in the rice field. Therefore, it was customary to offer food and rice to these deities before engaging in farming activities in the Mekong River basin.

The term "minority" refers to indigenous groups who inhabited an area before a majority group gained influence over them. The Zhuang people are considered a minority within Chinese culture, while the Isan people in Thailand and various Tai ethnic groups in Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam also fall into this category. Upon examining the myths of various peoples in the Mekong River Subregion, it has been observed that frogs and toads hold a minority status within different countries and ethnic groups, such as the Zhuang people, the Isan people, as well as the Black Tai and White Tai people. These minorities reside in countries where the majority is comprised of other ethnic groups. The myth of the little frog princess in the Zhuang culture sheds light on the derogatory term "Little frogman" used by northern Chinese to refer to southern Chinese (Richard Wilhelm and Frederick H. Martens, 2022: 348). This term is commonly used by individuals of the Han ethnic group, who account for the majority population. However, it is often directed towards ethnic groups other than the Han people, particularly the Zhuang people residing in southern China. Furthermore, Wang (2022) further explores this concept in the article "A Study of the Cultural Meaning of Zhuang's Frog Festival in Guangxi, China," which uncovers the cultural significance of the annual frog worship tradition within the Zhuang community. One of the cultural meanings identified is its representation of the Zhuang ethnic group, which is a minority in China. The frog worship ceremony thus symbolically represents fertility, signifying the desire to increase the population of the Zhuang people to a level comparable to that of frogs. Yablon (2009:

151) has proposed that "Frogs symbolize reproduction. Not only are they capable of laying up to 1,500 eggs at once, but they are also remarkably self-sufficient, particularly in the development and growth of tadpoles, which rapidly transform into adult frogs." Therefore, the frog is utilized as a symbol of life's origin in the Zhuang culture, serving to preserve the sense of existence within the ethnic group.

Upon considering the myths of various peoples in the Mekong River Subregion, it has been discovered that frogs and toads hold a minority status within different countries and ethnic groups. For example, the myth of the Frog Princess from the Zhuang people tells the story of a frog who was once a young native woman and married a Han prince. However, after enduring insults, she returned to her own country. Another example is the myth of Phaya Kankhak from the Isan people, where an ugly-looking Phaya Kankhak led a small army of animals to fight against Phaya Than Luang, who possessed the power to control the sky and rainfall in the human world. Hence, frogs and toads are symbolic of minority groups who hold a lower social standing compared to the majority group. Furthermore, these myths also include instances of toads fighting against gods with higher status in traditional beliefs, such as the Cambodian myth of the war between Brahma and the Toad, or the Zhuang myth of the wise frog and the wise emperor. There is also the myth of the toad and the governor of the Tai Lue ethnic group in the city of Sipsongbanna in China, among others. As such, the characters of frogs and toads serve as metaphors that imply the elite in society looking down upon minorities.

Frogs and toads, in myths, symbolize the common people and are often depicted as a marginalized minority in society. They represent ethnic minorities who, despite their lower social status, are believed to embody morality and goodness. However, frogs and toads also symbolize abundance and prosperity, as well as the power of minorities to conquer or negotiate with larger and more influential rulers, such as Phaya Than Luang, the King of Heaven, or Emperors.

It should be noted that some ethnic groups also engage in conflicts or negotiations with dominant rulers. For example, in the myth of the wise frog and the dumb Emperor, the emperor sought the frog's assistance in calling for rain. The frog proposed a trade, asking the emperor to remove his dragon robe, a symbol of his authority, in exchange for the frog's skin. Eventually, the frog donned the emperor's dragon robes, becoming human, while the emperor transformed into a frog and was expelled from the palace by the newly transformed emperor-frog. This characteristic reveals how marginalized individuals, like the frog representing a minority group, strive for power and meaning by assuming the role of a ruler with significant influence within the narrative context. Across various cultures, the frog in this myth thus becomes a symbol of intelligence and wisdom, associated with good fortune. It exemplifies the ability to challenge and compete with the dominant culture in Chinese society in a compelling manner.

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

In conclusion, a comprehensive exploration of the symbolic meanings attributed to frogs and toads in the myths and rituals of the people inhabiting the Mekong Subregion reveals four primary connotations: 1) frogs and toads as representatives of gods and sacred entities 2) frogs and toads as representatives of folk beliefs and Buddhism 3) frogs and toads are associated with rain and abundance and 4) frogs and toads represent certain minorities and ethnic groups. The characteristics, meanings, and roles attributed to frogs and toads in the studied myths and rituals indicate a multitude of beliefs surrounding these creatures. Some view them as possessing supernatural powers, capable of beckoning water and rain, and representing prosperity and abundance. They are also closely linked to the spiritual realm and serve as representatives of specific ethnic groups. While the depictions of frogs and toads in myths and rituals may vary significantly, they share a common underlying concept: frogs and toads are special creatures that hold significant importance and possess a sacred status. The worship of frogs and toads within the myths and rituals of the Mekong Subregion thus reflects a crucial belief system within Mekong culture, emphasizing reverence for the power that governs humans and nature. It serves as an expression of gratitude for human existence and fosters a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the divine forces believed to control or influence the course of natural phenomena and human livelihood.

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