

Representations of Women's Power and Divinity in the Myths of Tai Peoples

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Abstract

This article examines female characters in the myths of the Tai peoples which represent power and divinity of women in the Tai's societies. Twenty myths of the Tai peoples both in literary and oral traditions were the subjects of the study. The findings revealed the four main representations of women as 1) creator and the earliest human ancestor; 2) food producer and nurturer; 3) cultural leader; and 4) medium between the human world and the divine world. These representations reflect the Tai peoples' society and culture. Women were represented as 1) the divines, having supernatural power, powerful beings; 2) abundance of food, creators of life, caretakers; and 3) supporters and followers of Buddhism. The female characters in the Tai myths symbolized faithful Buddhists and strong supporters of the religion. The findings also emphasize significance of the myths as a cultural tool for a better understanding of cultural women's roles.

Keywords: Representation, Women Power, Divinity, Myth, Tai Peoples

INTRODUCTION

Myths of origin either creation myths or origin myths of humans, animals, plants, and nature refer to the tales that reflect human beings' thoughts and imaginations of their worldviews, values, ideas and beliefs in each culture. For the Tai's peoples, either living in Thailand or abroad, their myths about the natural world and human life always portray females' power to create the world and nature. Some of the myths depict females as the first human being born on earth prior to males. The others describe women as creators of nature, such as rivers, forests, lands, stars, or the moon, which is considered vital to human life. In other words, women are viewed as natural goddesses of such natural surroundings. Moreover, women are perceived as the medium between human world and the divine world. They often play their roles as spiritual mediums, locally known as Nang Tiem. Thus, women in the Tai's culture have been regarded as powerful beings and tied to the traditional belief system of the culture. Such women's representations can be traced back to many social studies of people in Southeast Asia. These studies present some strong evidence of original ritual performances in many parts of the region some of which have been performed until today. These ritual performances reflect the traditional belief systems of Southeast Asia aborigines who paid high regards to females. In other words, archaeological evidence prior to the prehistoric period including myths reflecting people's thoughts and beliefs reveals that women have had important roles and have been regarded highly in these cultures.

The work of Sujit Wongthes (2016) addresses that in the prehistoric era or around 3,000 years ago Southeast Asian women were regarded as having higher status and roles than men. In that era, men were not allowed to take important roles. Women could become leaders, shamans, or heads of ethnic groups. All of these roles exemplify women's leading roles in performing any rituals. In Wongthes' study, women are perceived as creators and cultural inheritors. Consequently, they owned all kinds of tools including musical and dance instruments. In addition, the study of Pranee Wongthet (2006) highlights that Southeast Asian myths represent women as mothers; fertility; powerful leaders; advisory / dominating wives; liberated individuals who can choose their marital partners, gurus in trade and economy; powerful sacred ancestors, and shamans or spiritual leaders. Wongthet's work is in the same vein as that of Chonthira Sattayawattana (2018). She suggests that it is more likely that prior to men, women in the earlier Tai society took the mentioned roles and were in a higher status than men.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The women's representation in the myths of the Tai peoples both residing in Thailand and abroad can be classified into four main groups. *First Group* focuses on female as the first gender being born on earth. According to the myths portraying such representation, before the beginning of the world, the ocean existed but not land. Later, the goddess or the first woman came from heaven to earth. Then, the god followed her, and both became husband and wife. They were considered our ancestors. *The origin of the World in the Lan Na tradition: Pathamamulamuli* (Anatole-Roger Peltier, 1991) depicts the story of a woman as the first human born on earth. The woman was also a creator of life. This myth is in the same vein as *Pathom Kap Myth* (Tai Yuan). It illustrates that in the beginning there was no land. Only air and water existed. The wind blew on water until it bubbled and turned into soil. Then, various trees and plants grew. Later, Yaa Saang Sai (a woman) appeared. She fed herself with flowers. Later, Pu Saang Sii (a man) came. He ate flowers (Vagn Plenge, 1976). Meanwhile, *Myth of Rice* (Tai Dam) describes that in the past we lived underneath the earth. We were born from the earth. The origin of humans came out of the earth's hole and a woman was the first human born out of it (Sujit Wongthes, 2003). These myths reflect the powerful status and seniority of women as the earliest human ancestors, mothers, and the descent of human beings since the prehistorical period.

Second Group portrays women as a representative of nature which lay vital benefits to human beings. According to the myths of this group, nature such as the moon and the stars, that provide light to humans at night, were females. Rivers or lands are believed to be females as well. *The Sun and the Moon Myth* (Tai Khoen) describes the story of the king and the queen of one land who performed meritorious acts and made strong wishes that they had power to lighten the world. With the consequences of their good merits, when the king passed away, he was reincarnated as the sun with the power burn anything. The queen herself made her wish to become powerful across the universe. Her wish was to provide coolness, gentleness and support at night. When she passed away, she was reincarnated as the moon shining her light at night for the world ever since (Vagn Plenge, 1976). This myth reiterates the belief of Tai Yuan and Tai Yai peoples that the moon and the stars are females.

Third Group represents women as symbols of plants and food. In other words, women are perceived as being "the goddess /mother of rice", known as Mae Pho Sop, Mae Khwan Khao, or Yaa Khwan Khao. These lexical choices reflect the Tai's culture in which all Tai peoples' lives are related to rice farming. The myths about rice, thus, are vital and have been retold among the Tai peoples. In retelling the myths of the Tai peoples, the same goddess of rice, "Khwan Khao" or sometimes called by other names, is always the central character (Siraporn Nathalang, 2017). Although some details of the stories may be somewhat different, the main content is along the same line. In some tales, grains of rice were large in size. Later, they were smashed and sold which hurt Mae Khwan Khao's feelings and the incident led to her disappearance. Since the day she left, people suffered in the grip of starvation. Thus, they made their wishes for her return. Other stories describe humans who paid their respects to the Buddha and forgot the kindness of Mae Khwan Khao. Consequently, she was angry and hurtful and left the land. When the famine happened, these peoples asked the Buddha to implore her to return. It is clear that the women's status represented through the image of Mae Khwan Khao illustrates that the peoples were indebted to the goddess. Mae Khwan Khao has provided life and soul as well as nurtured humans. She has sacrificed her body as human's food until present.

Fourth Group portrays the images of women as strong supporters of Buddhism. The myths for this representation illustrate women as goddesses with supernatural power that allowed them to successfully fight with devils who attacked the Buddha. *The Goddess of Earth Myth* (Thai North) depicts the story of the Buddha who lived a very ascetic life for his enlightenment. He encountered all devils who tried to prevent him from enlightenment. However, he could endure desires. At the same time, Mother Earth (Phra Mae Thorani), who was believed to be the goddess protecting the lands, showed her supernatural power to support the Buddha. She squeezed her long hair so that the large amount of water poured out and washed away all the devils. For this myth, Phra Mae Thorani acted as the mother of the earth who supported many living creatures including humans. Apart from this myth, the other myths portray women who promote propagation of Buddhism, and as the builders of Buddha's relics and Buddha statues which symbolize sacredness and representation of the Buddha himself. All of these creations were also thought of as offerings to the Buddha.

METHODS

One question derives from these scholars' works. How do women's portrayals in the myths of the Tai peoples offer cultural meanings? To some extent, the portrayals of women as powerful and sacred, according to the original religious beliefs in the ancient myths of the Tai peoples, could reflect the importance of women and their roles in the Tai's sociocultural contexts. The Tai peoples or Tai race here refer to Tai Speaking peoples who reside in Thailand and in neighboring countries, such as Tai Yuan, Tai Isan in Thailand, Tai Yai, Tai Khoen in Myanmar, Tai Dehong, Tai Lue in Yunnan, China, Laotians in Laos and Tai Dam and Tai Khao in Northern Vietnam. These Tai peoples use the Tai language family and share many similar cultures.

Female characters in the myths of the Tai peoples were portrayed with images that conveyed interesting sociocultural meanings. The term representation could be considered as the important concept applicable to this study of women's portrayals through the language of the myths. The work of "representation" by Stuart Hall (1997) proposed that representation through language is the production of meaning in our minds. Moreover, the connection between our concepts, signs / symbols, and languages allows us to assign meanings to things in this world—whether they are objects, people, events, or abstract ideas. The myths of the Tai's people could be considered as cultural information through the use of language, and are suitable subjects of this study. We include the myths of origin and the tales focusing on women's supernatural power. Oral and literary traditions of these myths of the Tai peoples (i.e. Tai Lue, Tai Khoen, Tai Yai, Laotians, Thais in the North, Thais in Isan, Phu Tai, Tai Nyo Tai Phuan and Tai Dam residing in Thailand and in neighboring countries) are studied.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the myths that have been retold in the Tai's society are not just ordinary tales. When the myths have been taken into consideration through the views of folklore, they are claimed and perceived as a kind of sociocultural communication tool. A more in-depth study to decode the myths should unlock their implicit meanings. Based on many previous research and academic works, a thorough study about women's representations of power and divinity in terms of folklore or through the myths of the Tai peoples remains scarce. Thus, this study would help filling the research gap.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To illustrate the roles of female characters in the myths of the Tai peoples which are related to women's representations of power and divinity, the four main representations of the female characters will be elaborated as follows: 1) creator and the earliest human ancestor; 2) food producer and nurturer; 3) cultural leader; and 4) medium of the human world and the divine world.

Creator And the Earliest Human Ancestor

The myths in this type of representation focus on human origin that a female was the first gender being born on earth after the lands existed. The myths of many Tai peoples' groups illustrate the world being flooded and none of the living things existed. Later, when the world was dried, the first human appeared. It was a woman. *Mae Nok Jok Myth* (Zhuang) describes that in the past the universe was divided into three parts: the sky, ground, and water. However, there were no living things on earth in the earlier day. Later, flowers popped out of the ground. When in full bloom, a woman was born out of the first flower's pistil. She later created other humans. The woman was called Mae Nok Jok. She made a man and a woman from mud. Another version of the myth was *Mae Loh Khab Myth* (Zhuang) which illustrates the story of the goddess Mae Loh Khab who was the first human born on earth. She made other humans similar to her appearance and other living things on earth from clay (Wu Man, 2561, 64). The myth of Mae Loh Khab allows us to highlight the Zhuang people's belief that female was the first gender born on earth. In Zhuang culture, as compared to males, females are in a higher hierarchy than males.

It could be pointed out that the perception of having a woman as the first human on earth is not only present in the culture of Zhuang, but it is also in the oral traditions of the Northern Thais or Lanna people. They believe that female was the first gender born on earth prior to males as can be seen in *Pathom Kap Myth* (Tai yuan). The myth illustrates that in the past there was no land, only air and water. The wind blew on water until it bubbled

and turned into soil. Then, various trees and plants grew. Later, there appeared Yaa Saang Sai (a woman). The woman fed herself with flowers. Later, Pu Saang Sii (a man) came and ate flowers (Vagn Plenge, 1976). These myths reflect some cultural thoughts of people who speak Tai-Kadai languages. Women were as the earliest human ancestor signifying their seniority and eldership. Women are also perceived as mothers of humans and all living things. Based on these original cultural viewpoints since the creation of the world, women have vital roles as natural and cultural creators.

The portrayal of women in this kind of myths highlights female as the first gender born on earth and the creator of all things. Moreover, the image of women as the creator of mankind emphasizes women's status as the earliest ancestors of humans. Although we later saw the births of both male and female humans, the myths focus on male and female humans who were born from the goddess with supernatural power. The goddess is equal to the mother as described in *Mae Lob Khab Myth* of Zhuang people. The goddess Mae Loh Khab was the first human born in the pistil of the first flower on earth. The myth reflects Zhuang peoples' belief that women are a part of nature. In addition, the myth could be perceived as to point to ancient cultural foundation in Southeast Asian societies in which they give importance to women.

The reiteration of female portrayals in the myths as the first gender born on earth and as the earliest ancestor of humans while males were the gender created by the power of women reflect the representation of female humans as mothers. The evidence, which supports the traditional beliefs of the Tai peoples that women were heads of the families or societies, appears to relate to the concept of "matriarchy". This concept refers to the power system in which mother is the head or the center of the society, and has more or similar level of power to a man. Thus, a woman's status is higher than that of a man who was born later than the woman. This kind of belief has been presented in the myths since the great flood era.

According to the beliefs of many ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, a number of similar myths about women portray them as the originator of living things in the world. For instance, Akha people believe that women are the origin of everything (Suntree Phrommes, 1991). Apart from the Akha's myths, many other ethnic groups' myths illustrate that humans were born from melon seeds large enough to contain babies, locally known as Nam Tao Pung (Siraporn Nathalang, 2002). Nam Tao Pung is similar to a woman's uterus. It is a mother's womb in which it carries human's life. It could be said that the myths in this group reflect the common belief of many people in these ethnic groups. It is that humans were born from women—whether they are represented as Nam Tao Pung, land, or flower. Thus, it is clear that the myths of ethnic groups in Southeast Asia including those of the Tai people reflect the belief that all human beings were born from women who were perceived as the nature or a part of the nature, and the creator of life.

The creation myths of the Northern Thais stress the seniority and importance of women. They represent the first creator of life as well as spirit of all humans of every gender and living things in the world as seen in *the origin of the World in the Lan Na tradition: Pathamamulamuli*. The myth describes the story of a mother who created the world. The mother created three genders: male; female; and transgender. The myth clearly points to the role of women as the goddess who created humans. The myth describes "grandmother It Tang Khai Ya Sang Ka Sii" who created the first human from the earth element and also marked humans in three genders (Pathom Hongsuwan, 2550, 247). The myth suggests that the grandmother was the earliest ancestor of humans who eventually gave birth to other humans of later periods. Each human being on earth, according to the Northern Thais' belief, was born from the grandmother—the creator of human.

From the mentioned myths, the role of "grandmother It Tang Khai Ya Sang Ka Sii" could be viewed as creator goddess. Thus, human's body and spirit are created based on the female image. Komkrit Uitekkeng (2007) explains that respecting women has been practiced since the ancient time or prehistoric period. Such thought has been valued everywhere in the world. Women are linked with the divinity in terms of fertility because they can give birth and nurture children. However, when religions were founded by great men, women gradually have less important roles. The images of women either as goddesses or priestesses also diminished.

It is evident that the creation myth illustrates cultural evidence and information of the Tai peoples. It shows their worldviews and strong beliefs about nature as well as the importance of women. The representation of

their religious system of belief which pay high regard to the nature, thus, reflects the belief in paying homage to spirits in all natural surroundings—whether sky, mountain, river, land, or many trees— all are related to females. In other words, the creation myths of the Tai peoples describe women as having vital roles—whether being the earliest ancestor of humans and the spirits in the nature. Such myths highlight women’s roles as life and spirit creators for humans and living things.

In addition, the portrayals of women as the nature and mothers who give birth to human race and take care of their children have inspired the Tai peoples to communicate their worldviews as mentioned earlier. Women have their values for humans regardless of genders. The women’s nature is always beneficial. She provides life. To some extent, the representation of women as the mothers of humans in the creation of the world period is another way to reflect significance of women in the original belief system of the Tai peoples.

The creation myths of the Tai peoples as mentioned could be considered as evidence of the belief of peoples in this ethnic group. It is that women were the earliest ancestor relating to original religious belief of the Tai peoples living in Southeast Asia. Therefore, women have been perceived as divines and the representatives of power since a woman was the first born on earth since the creation of the world period. It is believed that women possess power that can communicate with supernatural things. Women are also life creators and nurturers of humans who can save them from any life crisis conditions.

FOOD PRODUCER AND NURTURER

In the myths about the goddesses of the Tai’s people, certain characters and events reflect the viewpoints that women were food producers and nurturers. This is because the main role of women in the Tai culture is a mother who nurtures their children. Moreover, a mother is expected to take care of the household chores—from cooking and cleaning the house to disciplining children. Moreover, women are related to being the sacred gender who can give life and represent fertility.

In examining myths of different Tai cultures, we found women’s representation of supernatural power relating to food producing. It can be seen in the myths of “the goddess /mother of rice”, known as Mae Pho Sop, Mae Khwan Khao, or Yaa Khwan Khao myths. The myths depicts a woman as the goddess of rice which is considered an important food for the Tai peoples. The myths also point to the central idea about women’s power in the belief of the Tai peoples from past until present as can be viewed in *Yaa Khwan Khao Myth* (Tai Khoen). The myth talks about Yaa Khwan Khao, while sitting in front of Buddha. She did not pay respect to him because she thought she had more merits than him. Buddha had refuted her explanation and said that he was the one with more merits. She, then, was upset and fled to Dubsing City. Since then, it stopped raining causing a draught. Buddha had no rice to eat. He implored Yaa Khwan Khao to return and took her crown hair back as well. As soon as he arrived, the land is filled with food and fertility. The people of the land, thus, performed head rice blessing ritual (Sujit Wongthes, 2003) to pay respect to the kindness of Yaa Khwan Khao ever since.

Similar versions of the myth in which Yaa Khwan Khao argued with the Buddha about the quantities of the merits made were also found in the rice myths of Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, and Tai Khoen peoples. “In the Buddhist era, Buddhist monks and villagers gathered to meet the Buddha. The Lord Buddha noticed one lady who refused to pay respect to him. He, then, asked who she was. A monk told him that the lady was Yaa Khwan Khao. She felt upset because the Buddha could not recognize her despite the fact that she always offered food to every Buddha. Thus, she fled to Dub Sang City. Without her presence, all human beings were starving for thousands of years. The Lord Buddha had to go look for her, brought her back, and accepted her great merit. Yaa Khwan Khao held her breath until her death and turned into rice for the Buddha and other human beings to consume from then on.” (Siraporn Nathalang, 2020). It is clear that the Tai peoples believe that rice is sacred which is why people must pay respect. Rice is not simply a part of nature, but it is the goddess of grains and plants who provide food to people. In turn, these people pay respect to her by performing rituals of worshipping.

Another interesting point is that geographical locations of these Tai peoples are always close to alluvial plains. Thus, the Tai peoples feel very close to the rivers. The lands of the Tai peoples are also good for agriculture.

Consequently, the original beliefs of these people give more importance to female since it is the gender that relates to nature and environment. Moreover, the Tai people also believe that women represent fertility which can be seen from the way people pay respect to the goddesses in nature. For instance, the goddess Mae Pho Sop is believed to be in grains of rice. Mae Kong Kaa is with the rivers. Trees have Nang Mai. Lands have Mae Thorani. All vehicles, such as boats, have Mae Yaa Nang who guards against danger and evils. These worldviews and beliefs could be considered as cultural heritage of the Tai peoples that has been retold and has widely captured the Tai people's interest. One hypothesis is that although most Tai peoples claim that Buddhism is the main religion, there is a large number of goddesses when compared to gods especially in rural societies that hold on to the traditional beliefs. Consistent evidence from the myths of the Tai peoples residing both inside and outside of Thailand shows a trace of the use of folklore information in the form of myths, beliefs and rituals as cultural evidence that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Considering the content of Mae Phosop myth above, we find that the Tai peoples live in an agricultural community with rice farming as the main way of living. Rice, '*kebam*' or '*kebam*' in the Tai languages, is the main food and rice cultivation is the basic occupation of the Tai peoples both in and outside Thailand. The production of rice, whether large or small quantity, is a good reflection of the economy and the lives of Tai peoples. The beliefs about rice can also be found in other groups of ethnicities in Southeast Asia. In the above myth, Mae Phosop was hurt that Lord Buddha could not recognize her despite her kindness to all the Lord Buddhas in the past because she sacrificed herself as food for them. This shows that the belief in Mae Phosop had existed before Buddhism. The event that happened in the end is that Mae Phosop held her breath to turn her body into a grain to give people the source of food. It is a feminine culture at its best. The image of turning her body into a grain that will be used to grow as human food emphasizes pure psychological beauty of women. It is a presentation of the spirit of women as a selfless mother who serves to raise children in a gentle and courageous act because they can sacrifice even their lives to become an important food source to keep people from starving. It also shows an image of a woman who is a goddess who inspires fertility and has divine spiritual status.

It is noted that rice plays an important role in the Tai peoples' beliefs as can be seen from the tendency to choose location to build a community in the plain area along the big rivers due to rice cultivation. As such, many Tai peoples have certain expressions to convey the significance of rice as a symbol of abundance, such as "fish in the river, rice in the field" or "with plenty of rice and salt, the country is prosperous", which means if a country has abundant rice and fish, it will find happiness and prosperity. Moreover, rice is a sacred symbol that is linked to way of life and culture. This concept is an indication that the rice culture has been a unique identity of the Tai peoples for a long time. Since they live in an agricultural society, most of the Tai peoples reside in a fertile landscape suitable for rice cultivation. This makes the Tai communities base their culture on an agricultural production from the past until now.

Besides, in the cultures of various ethnic groups in the Mekong region, many of the rice cultural communities have myths and beliefs that rice is female. Some call rice Mae Khaw. Some call it Kwan Khaw or Grandma Kwan Khaw. Sometimes rice is referred to as the goddess of rice. For example, Tai Dam, Muang La, and Tai Khao, Muang Turk believe that rice was the female deity in the Tai peoples' thinking system. The myths above depict a woman of very high status because rice has been a symbol of the life and spirituality of the Tai peoples since the past. It also reflects the notion that women are mothers, who give birth and raise their children. In the Tai way of thinking, most people associate motherhood with fertility. If so, the meaning of a woman in relation to being a food producer is comparable to that of a woman with fertility. It is also related to the abundance of food and prosperity of the country.

WOMEN AS CULTURAL LEADERS

This group of myths emphasizes the representation of women as cultural leaders. One role is to propagate Buddhism to the people and the other role is to create clothing and singing in customs and rituals.

In terms of women propagating Buddhism to the Tai peoples, this group of myths has a similar story: it is often told that aristocratic women, queens or princesses traveled from their country to the land of the Tai

peoples bringing monks, Buddha images and sacred Buddhist scriptures with them. Some claim that women spearheaded in building temples, pagodas and Buddha statues to be worshipped which later became revered by the people of the country. For example, the tale of Phra Nang Chamadevi (Tai Yuan) describes that Phra Nang Chamadevi is the daughter of the governor of Lavo who rose to the throne at the invitation of Wasuthep the Hermit. Her important role is bringing Buddhism to be flourished in the Lanna Kingdom. She was described as having merits and divine power as well as being the supporter of Buddhism. In the myth of Phra That Doi Kham (Tai Yuan), it is said that Wasuthep the Hermit adopted a baby girl, Chamadevi, who grew up to be the most beautiful girl in the country. She ruled the city of Hariphunchai after the hermit passed away and continued to support the glory of Buddhism. In Lao's myths, the myth of Phra Bang (Laos) is about Phra Nang Kaew Kengya, wife of King Fa Ngum, who was a Khmer princess and a devout Buddhist. When she witnessed the people and the socialites of Lan Chang killing elephants, horses and cattle to do sacrifice for ghosts and spirits, she was sad and told her husband to bring Buddhism from Cambodia to Phra Bang (see Doungwilai, Hongswan and Tularak. 2012). She also brought monks, scholars and many followers along with a Buddha image called Prabang in "haam yaat" posture (the attitude of stopping the relatives from quarreling), Buddhist scriptures and other religious objects to the land of Lao Lan Chang.

This group of myths reflects the important role played by women as leaders of Buddhist culture who brought Buddhist knowledge and religious items for people to worship. Since then, Buddhism has become the main religion of these Tai peoples. Demonstrating the importance of women in religious leadership is at the core of this group of myths. This representation of women who supported and cared for Buddhism shows the power, prestige and power of faith towards Buddhism. The representation of men, whether it be Wasuthep the Hermit, adoptive father of Phra Nang Chamadevi or King Fa Ngum, husband of Phra Nang Kaew Keng Ya, is such that they were not Buddhist at the beginning. Thus, it shows the importance of women in the role of leading Buddhism into these Tai people's urban communities to help the people lead moral life which would bring peace to the country. This type of myth is also found in the myth of Phra Chaw Liap Lok, of northern Thai, Isan Thai and Laotian people. In this myth, after Buddha had enlightened, he traveled by flying in the air with his disciples to the Mekong region to take the hair and put his footprints on these lands. When we compare the character's behavior with the mythological content above, we find that the women in the Tai peoples' culture are comparable to the Buddha and the disciples who traveled to propagate Buddhism while bringing religious items to be enshrined for people to worship until this day.

In addition to being the propagator of Buddhism in the Tai communities, we also find a Tai Dam's tale explaining the origin of weaving of sarong as a garment for women. Some are worn in rituals. Some are used in daily life. The myth of Sin Nang Han (Tai Dam) describes that the first women who invented this spectacular sarong were the 3 sisters. The first sister created the pattern and started to weave but she died before she could finish it. So, the second sister continued the task but again, died before the task was finished. The third sister then promised the guardian spirits that if she succeeded in weaving this sarong, a sacrifice would be made to them. With a strong determination and courage despite difficulties in weaving, the third sister successfully finished weaving the sarong. Since then, Tai Dam women wear Nang Han sarong in the ceremony of worshipping the house spirit until now (Chontira SattayaWattana, 2018). Tai Dam people explain that the word "Nang Han" means courage and determination of a woman. The sarong represents the identity of the Tai Dam people that reflects their cultural thinking in an interesting way.

We also observe other influences of women in terms of creative invention to achieve culture and tradition. In addition to the invention of patterns and methods of weaving sarongs and garments, In Tai Lue culture, it is believed that the traditional song master was a woman. As seen in the myth of a song master and a Klok bird (Tai Lue), a young woman heard the beautiful singing of a Klok bird. Later, the bird was killed by a gunshot. She was very sad and missed the bird so she learned how to sing the various melodies like him. Later, this woman became the first Tai Lue song master and taught young people how to sing (Zheng Peng Yan Wen Bien, 1992, 8-9). Women play a role as a leader and instructor of the art of singing. Women was also found to be linked to the birth of Songkran or the New Year, which is a very prominent tradition of the Tai peoples. It was found that the history of this tradition is believed to be caused by women. There are several similar myths of Songkran of the Tai peoples. For example, the myth of Songkran (Lao) describes that Thao Kabinlaphrom

asked a riddle to Dhammabala Kumara. If Kumara could solve the riddle, Thao Kabinlaphrom would cut off his own head. It turned out that Dhammabala Kumara could solve the riddle. Thao Kabinlaphrom had to keep his promise by cutting off his head. But because he is a powerful god, his head would burn the earth if it touches the ground and if left in the air, the land will have drought. If thrown into the ocean, the water will dry out. Therefore, his seven daughters must each take turn to carry his head in a tray and parade around Phra Sumeru Mountain. Each year, they take turn to carry their father's head to worship and clean it with water regularly. Since then, people have joined together to bring scented water and clean water and splash water on each other, which is the origin of the Songkran tradition ever since.

As for the southern Tai peoples, they have a slightly different version of Songkran myth. According to their myths, a giant kidnapped seven sisters to make them his wives. The youngest sister strangled him to death with her own hair. Through her brave action, people of the city have joined together at Songkran splashing water on each other because they believe that the cool and clear water will wash away the blood stains from the seven sisters. It expresses gratitude for the good that the seven women have helped prevent disasters from occurring to ordinary humans (Prakong Nimmanhaemin, 2011, 345). These tales point to a leadership role of women in various dimensions. The representation of women in myths thus conveys a variety of meanings related to the Tai peoples' way of life and culture as an inventor of weaving, singing, propagating and sustaining of Buddhism including water splashing in the Songkran festival or the Tai people's New Year.

From the above, the representation of women as cultural leaders of the Tai peoples also reflects the way of life today where women play a part of invention, whether it is related to religious beliefs, or even worldly life to bring happiness and entertainment, as in the case of the song master.

WOMEN AS THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE HUMAN WORLD AND THE SACRED WORLD

As mentioned above, women are the dominant gender depicted in myths from ancient times. This can be seen from traces of beliefs and rituals of many Tai peoples that convey the connection and relationship with the sacred and supernatural. Women have been used as a medium to connect with these beings and they are believed to be a sacred gender since ancient times.

Sacred and profane is a school of thought used for analyzing the religious belief system in human society (Emile Durkheim, 1915). It is likely that myths, beliefs and rituals, as an element of the religious belief system, contain sacred and profane concepts as well. Considering these concepts, it is interesting to see what determines women to be the sacred gender that represents the mediator of these two concepts.

The word 'mae' (mother) appears to be a term used for a woman who has given birth and childcare, as in the previous section. This is a normal gender status. But the word 'mae' can be used in a compound to form a new word, for example 'mae sue' meaning guardian angels for newborns, 'mae thorani' meaning goddess protecting land, 'mae mod' meaning witches, 'mae yaa naang' meaning guardian angels for boats, 'mae phosop' goddess of rice, as well as 'mae mueang' meaning women with power to cure illness according to traditional beliefs. These terms are present in many Tai belief systems with a meaning related to supernatural power, witchcraft and magic.

The question that follows is why women are used in word formation in the context of supernatural powers, spirits or gods outside the Buddhist worldview. Buddhism which is the mainstream religion of the Tai peoples consider shamanism ignorant, irrational, and cannot be used as a central principle of religion because it is not related to the destination that leads to the highest state nor does it lead to wisdom and insight. It cannot actually get rid of desires, end suffering or lead to an understanding of the truths.

From the study of tales, myths and beliefs in Tai culture, it was found that there are beliefs that a woman's body is directly related to divine power. For example, women's menstruation is linked to supernatural power in relation to life and death. Some believe that menstrual blood has the power to destroy witchcraft spells. For example, the myth of Saap River (Southern Thailand) states that every year during the eleventh month, the color of the river turns red due to a giant lady's menstruation. The villagers believed that this giant lady had

cursed it. During this month, anyone who crosses the Saap River and carries talismans or magic, the magic will be destroyed. Nora actors are strictly superstitious, so they will not cross the river during this period. The story reflects the concept of the female body, which has implications for the woman's natural body. Carol P. Christ calls this phenomenon “the awesome powers of the female body” which depicts the image of women of the sacred gender in both nature and culture. Women are the creators who hold the power of life and destruction.

The above representation shows the acceptance of the power inherent in a female natural body to reinforce the image that has power over all evil forces making female the sacred gender according to traditional beliefs which is a form of social and cultural processes. This reflects the harmonious blend of ideas of “sacred” and “profane” genders. The manner in which women are deity or empowered, is viewed by Genevieve Lloyd (1984) as an escape from the oppression of men over women. Women are considered less rational with lower cognitive and moral development than men. Women are pushed into the “marginalized” gender in the mainstream religious like Buddhism. They are deprived of moral power. Therefore, unorthodox belief systems are a legitimate area for women to show their full power.

When looking back on the role of women in Tai people's therapeutic rituals, such as the Lam Phi Fa ritual of Isan Thailand or the Phutai's Yao ceremony, we found that there were events indicating that the women who lead the ritual are closely related to supernatural powers. In other words, women are the mediator between the profane and the sacred worlds in many cultures. The “Lam Phi Fa” and “Yao” rituals are rituals about blessing and healing patients who have sickness of an unknown cause. The patients and their relatives believe that supernatural powers or ghosts are the ones causing illness. Therefore, there must be a worshiping ceremony. In the ceremony, a female dancer called “Mo Lam” or “Mo Yao” leads the ceremony by being the medium. Most of Mo Lam Phi Fa and Mor Yao are called “Nang Tiem” or “Mae Mueang”. In this sense, it suggests that the women who perform these rituals lead the spirits of the sick who are about to return to the spiritual world back to the human world. In other words, it is the woman who acts as a spiritual healer in this ritual because she leads the patient's spirit back to heal the illness. The ritual act of Nang Tiem or Mae Muang in this ceremony makes it clear that women play the role of communicators with supernatural powers. It also reflects the sacred identity of women.

For this reason, women have become a sacred gender because the gods created them the same way as “Maa Khee” of northern Thailand. Nowadays, some areas in the Phutai or Thai Isan communities have male “Mo Lam” and “Mo Yao”. But we think this phenomenon happened recently. When comparing the ratio of Mo Yao in many areas including Mukdahan, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Kalasin provinces, it was found that most of them are women. The passing down of the traditional Mo Yao or Mo Lam Phi Fa was found to be from women to women and never to men. So, the right of being Mo Yao and Mo Lam Phee Fah, according to traditional beliefs, belongs to women.

The story about “Nang Tiem” or “Mae Muang” as a powerful sanctified being not only deals with the supernatural but also points out that gender in religious beliefs differs from gender in the world of everyday life. For example, Mae Muang's behaviors in Yao ceremonies are manifested in many characteristics. Sometimes she acts as a man and sometimes both a man and a woman simultaneously. It is believed that there is more than one spirit that enters the medium. The spirit could be a female spirit, a male spirit, an elite spirit, a Thai spirit, a Lao spirit, a soldier spirit, a boxer spirit, a nymph, Phee Faa, Phee Than, Phee Baan (house spirit) and Phee Muang (city spirit). It could be a literary character such as Thao Pha Daeng, Nang Ai, Thao Kalagade, Srithananchai, etc., that comes to the medium of Mae Muang. Therefore, the behaviors of Mae Muang are not limited to any particular gender. This characteristic reflects the status of a mediator and a connection between Mae Muang's realm and the physical realm. Mae Muang's gender in the Yao ritual is determined by supernatural powers.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have shown that the representation of women in the Tai peoples' myths is a meaningful component in the culture and worldview of this ethnic group. The representation of women is one of the most important elements as cultural reflection information. Women are represented with various status characteristics such as leader, goddess, mother, wife, queen, as well as being the originator of the Tai people's

beliefs. This shows the role and importance of women as not a marginalized gender. But women in the view of the Tai peoples still have the same potential as men. In the Tai peoples' view, both women and men create a balance in the world. Without one or the other, it is impossible to maintain and inherit human society, as Pathom Hongsuwan (2014, 50) states that "creating equality for brotherhood is a political ideology. Presenting the image of women with roles and abilities help transform their own country. In today's Tai society, women are being transformed at the level of state policy that supports the equality of women and men with emphasis on increasing political and social roles." Women in Tai folk tales are a representation of ideas and beliefs that convey the dimensions of relationships in connection with lifestyle, culture and society as well as the existing political ideology of the Tai peoples.

The results of the study show that women's representation not only has a variety of characteristics and status, but also shows a clue of traditional beliefs. Sometimes, it shows a matriarchy society which can be classified into four categories: 1) women as the creator and ancestors of man, 2) women as food producers and caregivers, 3) women as cultural leaders, and 4) women as a medium between the human and sacred worlds. It was found that the representation of women in these myths always has relationships with men as in the case of Pu Yer and Ya Yer, the myth about the creation of the world and the ethnic origin of the Lao people. It has been shown that the two main characters: Pu Yer, a man and Ya Yer, a woman, collaborated to create all things on earth, and they became the ancestors of the Lao people respected by all. The myth of world, human and things created by male and female ancestors also appears in the beliefs of many Tai peoples, such as the myth of Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee.

It is noted that the myth of *Pathamamulamuli* (Anatole Roger Peltier, 1991) describes that women are the first humans to be born on earth before men. It is also women who created life on earth. This corresponds to the myth of Pathom Kap (Tai Yuan) which states that the earth originally had no soil, only air and water. The wind blows the water until it forms a bubble which in turn becomes soil. Then there were many kinds of trees that followed. A woman (Ya Sang Sai) was born and fed on flowers. After that, a man (Pu Sang See) was born and also fed on flowers (Vagn Plenge, 1976, 425). This shows the powerful status and seniority of women since ancient times, as described above.

The presentation of women as a component in Tai people's way of life and culture reflected in the myths and legends that we have studied and analyzed above shows that women are cultural gender that plays an important role, not just the role in the household. They also have social, political and cultural roles. Even though myths are created from imagination, it is another special language that can communicate the belief system, emotions and thoughts. Such presentation reinforces and reaffirms the role and meaning of women alongside men as co-creators of mankind and a contributor to the life and customs of the community, which is an interesting way to create a gender equilibrium between women and men according to the Tai peoples' way of thinking.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to offer particular thanks to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Thailand. This article is an outcome of a Research Grant.

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