

Trees in Lao Myths and Beliefs: Roles and Symbolic Ecological Meanings through the Aspects of Folklore

Souliya Boupahanya¹, Pathom Hongsuwan²

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the roles and symbolic ecological significance of tree motifs as depicted in Lao myths and beliefs, derived from both literary and oral traditions. The study applies the concept of roles and symbolic ecological meanings within a folkloric framework for its analysis and interpretation. The findings indicate that tree motifs in Lao myths and beliefs encompass four primary roles and symbolic ecological meanings: first, as representations of the universe and life; second, as symbols of humanity and the supernatural; third, as embodiments of fertility and prosperity; and fourth, as representations of the Buddha and the principles of Buddhist teachings. We argue that the roles and symbolic ecological meanings of trees are intricately connected to the social and cultural dimensions in both profane and sacred senses, reflecting the thought systems of the people. This connection illustrates the worldview, values, and social ideology of Laos in a compelling manner.

Keywords: *Tree; Myths and beliefs; roles; Symbolic ecological meaning; Sacred motifs.*

Introduction

Caldecott (1993) posits that “*the natural world in human society is often described in a way that incorporates spiritual worldviews, which are expressed through symbols in many diverse local myths and tales.*” This notion suggests that nature extends beyond merely the landscape or environmental ecosystem as defined by scientific principles, a universal interpretation widely accepted globally. However, the statement highlights that nature, from the human perspective or worldview, diverges from this static, universal definition. Various states of nature are interpreted through ways of thinking that are intricately linked to the thought systems, beliefs, and religions prevalent among different social groups having a space in the spiritual world.

If we consider myths and beliefs of different cultural groups as a unique form of cultural information, a type of language created to convey specific meanings to future generations, it can be argued that “myths are a form of human communication” (Hongsuwan, 2007: 292). Myths function as a type of language or narrative often associated with sacred and supernatural stories and are deeply intertwined with symbolic concepts. Turner (1967), a symbolism anthropologist, emphasized the importance of studying religion and rituals within their specific cultural contexts, arguing that symbolic studies should prioritize the perspectives of the culture's members. This approach involves considering, analyzing, and interpreting symbols to understand their significance to the general public. Thus, the study of myths and beliefs should highlight the importance of various elements within these narratives, which shape the thoughts and worldviews of the people who belong to that culture. This understanding can reveal the cultural meanings embedded in these beliefs, serving as codes of thought that provide insights into human nature.

Furthermore, the role of sacred tales, myths and beliefs in community life extends beyond religious beliefs to encompass cultural identity expression. These stories can be employed to create ethnic identity, establish social spaces, and manage natural resources and environments within community areas amidst social change (Hongsuwan, 2014: 168-192).

This section aims to examine, analyze, and interpret the construction of meanings of tree motifs in the myths and rituals of various Thai groups. The motifs of forests and trees as elements of nature are intertwined with narratives of sacredness and supernatural power, leading to ritual traditions where communities express their reverence for the natural environment. This phenomenon reflects how societies construct the meaning of forests and trees, transforming them from mere ecological symbols to spiritual symbols. This shift presents a perspective on nature that diverges from universal scientific thinking since the meaning attributed to nature is shaped and defined by societal stories and beliefs. As Santasombat

¹ Department of Thai and Oriental Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham 44150, Thailand. E-mail: souliya.b@msu.ac.th

² Department of Thai and Oriental Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham 44150, Thailand. E-mail: h.pathom@gmail.com

(2013: 15) articulates, “Culture is a process in which humans originate and define meaning for life and things around us. For example, humans all over the world try to define the meaning of life, and the process of defining meaning for life may be in the form of religious beliefs, rituals, mythology, cosmology, etc. When humans in a society try to define the meaning of power, such a process of defining meanings inevitably becomes the creation of the basic “ideas” of the political and administrative systems of that society.” Similarly, Adler (2014) highlights that folk ideas encoded in myths and beliefs influence the definition of identity and the relationship between humans and nature. These definitions determine the status of nature within each culture.

The analysis of folklore data that are myths and rituals in Thai society, reveals that the meanings attributed to forests and trees encompass at least four dimensions: class and status, religious beliefs, ethnic politics, and gender. It can be considered the creation of new meanings for forests and trees in the social and cultural dimensions. These dimensions illustrate how nature is intertwined with social and cultural dynamics from historical to contemporary contexts.

The physical and spiritual aspects of trees have been imbued with new meanings that resonate with various cultural dimensions, including myths, beliefs, traditions, and rituals in Lao societies. Trees in Lao myths are often depicted as symbols of life, sacredness, and the spiritual realm, linking the universe with human existence. For instance, trees are used as symbols associated with gods, sacred entities, and supernatural powers, serving as bridges between the sacred and the mundane worlds. Religious beliefs often attribute special significance to different parts of trees—such as trunks, branches, leaves, flowers, or roots—used in rituals and religious practices.

From prehistoric times, humans have shown a profound interest in their environment, including natural elements such as the sun, moon, mountains, trees, and animals. The mysteries surrounding these elements have given rise to various beliefs and myths, often centered around the perceived mysterious power of these natural phenomena. Chris Berry, a paleobotanist at Cardiff University, England, has studied fossilized tree trunks found in China from 374 million years ago (cited in Withayakorn, 2017). His study reveals that this ancient tree once occupied areas all over the world. It also underscores the historical significance of trees as sources of sustenance and shelter. These plants are useful to humans in many ways, such as medicines and materials used in daily life. Furthermore, history has shown us that trees have been used to build houses, tools, clothing, food, and medicines, leading to the development of civilization and cities.

In addition, trees have been integral to the folklore of many cultures, including Lao myths such as the creation myth of PuYer-YaYer, where large trees were felled to establish cities. Similarly, the belief in the sacred Mani Kot tree, a tree that grew at Kaeng Li Phi, a large waterfall in the middle of the Mekong River in Khone Phra Pheng, Laos, which has been believed to be a sacred tree of Laos for a long time. Further, the Bodhi tree which is believed to be of great importance in the life of the Buddha because it is related to and is like a co-incarnation with the Lord Buddha. The fact that trees are used in various symbolic meanings like this shows the important role of trees in the cultural data of such groups of people.

The physical characteristics of trees are intertwined with notions of supernatural power and sacredness, embedding them deeply into the religious beliefs of the culture. Trees are not merely symbols of the sacred and spiritual; they also embody other traditions and belief systems. The veneration of sacredness, alongside the reverence for ancestors who are believed to have created life, connects trees to the cycles of birth, death, and the afterlife, as well as to concepts of health and illness. Trees often symbolize deities or ancestors, sometimes serving as mediums or links to spiritual realms and aligning with cultural beliefs about heaven or the afterlife. Furthermore, trees are regarded as vital supporters of human life, both spiritually and physically. They provide essential liquids, considered sacred water, which are used in rituals and as medicinal remedies for various ailments. Sangkhaphanthanon (2018) suggests that studying cosmological concepts in myths and folktales can reveal images of natural places and physical environments, which can be analyzed to uncover ecological implications. This approach highlights the role of nature in cultural narratives and the symbolic meanings attributed to natural elements such as representation of nature, paradigms or discourses about nature, or metaphors about nature to find its ecological meanings.

Therefore, we aim to analyze and interpret the role of tree motifs in Lao myths and beliefs, reflecting the roles and symbolic meanings of trees in cultural narratives. By examining these symbols, we will understand the beliefs, worldviews, values, and social ideologies of Lao people.

Objective of the Research

This research used qualitative research and analytical descriptive study to answer the research question: In what way do myths and beliefs about sacred trees in Lao society connect their role and symbolic meaning to social and cultural dimensions?

Data and Scope of the Study

We have selected 7 prominent Lao myths and beliefs with prominent images of tree motifs to study and analyze. All of them are Lao myths that have been passed down and published as written documents.

1. The myth of PuYer-YaYer appears in Hongsuwan's (2018) article “PuYer-YaYer: Myths and Rituals of Ancestor Spirits with Buddhism in Luang Prabang”, Journal of Lao Studies Volume 6, No 1, 94-108. and Wongsakda's article (1999). PuYer-YaYer. Journal of Moun Lao . 2(5), 125-140.

2. The myth of Khun Borom appears in the book of the Department of Literature. (1967). History of Khun Borom Rachathirat . Vientiane: Department of Literature, National Library of Laos.

3. The myth of Nam Tao Pung and Khleu Khao Kad appears in the book of Luanglad (1999). Khleu Khao Kad (the sacred tree). Vientiane: Children's Home for Culture and Education & the Lao-Japan Child Development Organization.

4. The myth of the four Champa trees appears in the book Institute for Research in Arts, Literature and Linguistics. (1992). Champa Siton , Vientiane: National Library.

5. The myth of the Mani Khot tree appears in Tour Dharm. (2024). Sacred tree, Mani Khot tree. Retrieved June 8, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InVceEqgEOo>

6. The myth of Phra Lak-Phra Lam appears in the book of Wongdara et al. (1987). Lao literature. Vientiane: Ministry of Education, Institute for Social Science Research.

7. The myth of Phaya Khankhak appears in the book of the Department of Literature. Phaya Khankhak . (1970). Vientiane: National Library, Ministry of Education. and the article of Wannaudorn & Hongsuwan. (2014). Phra Lak Phra Lam: The Representation of Cultural Ecology in Lao Society. The Journal of Lao Studies. (5)1, 94-107.

Research Results

From the above Lao myths and beliefs, we have summarized the findings into 4 important points as follows:

First, the Tree Represents the Universe and Life.

In the Lao masterpiece painting inside the main hall of Wat Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang, there is a large glass painting of the Tree of the Universe at the back of the hall. This artwork, a product of the Lan Xang school during the reign of King Saysettha in the 21st-22nd Buddhist centuries, features a decorative tree believed to represent the tree of the continent, heaven, or the heavenly city, thereby indicating that this temple is the universe's center (Singyabut, 2010). This tree is thought to be the “Golden Tree” (or the Cotton Tree). The original myths of Luang Prabang describes that Luang Prabang was settled in the area where the sacred golden tree was. The immense painting’s structure places the tree at the center, with branches spreading into a sharp halo that aligns with the pavillion’s gable. Flanked by two peacocks and figures of animals and people, this composition is interpreted by some as representing the universe's center (Chuwichian, 2014: 103).

Additionally, in the myth of PuYer-YaYer and Khleu Khao Kad, during the creation time, there was a large tree in the city of Taen that blocked sunlight, casting darkness and cold over the human world and causing great suffering (Hongsuwan, 2013: 110). This tree symbolizes a heavenly tree and the darkness represents night time which is caused by this heavenly tree.

In Lao beliefs, the universe is conceived as multilayered, separated by a large tree acting as a divider. These layers include the sky “Mueang Fa” or “Mueang Bon”, the earth “Mueang Lum”, and the underground or underwater layer “Mueang Badal”. This tree serves as a connecting road between these worlds, allowing humans to climb and travel to the sky. However, the myth of Nam Tao Pung explains that Phaya Thaen Luang is not pleased with the fact that human can come up to the sky. In his anger, he orders the large tree to cease functioning as a bridge between the sky world and the human world, thus separating the sky and earth and preventing travel between them.



Figure 1. A large stained-glass painting of the Tree of the Universe is located at the back of the main hall of Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang.

On the contrary, the myth of Phaya Khankhak (1970) indicates that the universe is depicted as comprising both a celestial city and a terrestrial city, interconnected by a sacred termite mound. This mound, which is formed from decayed wood or moist soil mixed with termite excrement, serves as the passageway that *Phaya Kankak* and his followers use to traverse from the human world to the celestial city and the city of Taen. Their journey aims to contend for seasonal rain and thunder. As a Bodhisattva, *Phaya Kankak* leads an army of all creatures to battle *Phaya Taen Luang* in the celestial city, emerging victorious and thereby securing rain and thunder for the human world, fostering agricultural fertility and city prosperity.

Similarly, the myth of *Phu Saphao Saphong* of Laos (Pengsaengkham, 2009: 66-73) recounts that *Phaya Taen* caused a great flood. However, *Phaya Taen's* son, having fallen in love with a human woman, descended to Earth to warn humanity. He instructed them to construct a large ship from various types of wood to save humans, plants, and animals from the deluge. This narrative illustrates the multifaceted relationship between nature and humanity, highlighting cultural perceptions of nature's significance. Anderson et al. (2022: 8) elucidate that nature, from various perspectives and traditional terms, symbolizes humanity and society's connection to the natural world. These interpretations underscore that the concept of nature varies among individuals and within different social contexts.

It is noted that in the myth of *Kblen Khao Kad*, also known as the myth of *Nam Tao Pung*, the Tree of the Universe is intricately connected to domestic animals, particularly the buffalo, which plays a crucial role in agricultural activities by assisting in plowing fields for rice cultivation. This myth describes *Kblen Khao Kad* tree as the Tree of the Universe, originating from the nostrils of a deceased buffalo. This tree gives rise to the Water Gourd, symbolizing the breath of the universe. The Water Gourd's fruit is believed to be the progenitor of various races inhabiting the Southeast Asian region. Specifically, it is considered a sacred plant created by the god Phraya Thaen, especially among the Mekong River basin communities. According to these beliefs, the five siblings of humanity, including Mon-Khmer, Thai-Lao, and Vietnamese speakers, originated from the same Water Gourd, establishing a shared lineage among these ethnic groups (Thompson, 1989). The Water Gourd, imbued with spiritual power, symbolizes prosperity and abundance, referred to in Lao culture as "Mak Nam." Its climbing vine nature also signifies longevity (Yablon, 2009: 171-173). The gourd fruit, representing Phaya Thaen, is believed to have created humans on earth (Saiphon, 1999). In Lao culture, the gourd fruit is often hung in homes to protect the inhabitants.

Trees, in general, are considered sacred objects reflecting traditional Lao beliefs. Many myths depict trees as abodes of supernatural power. Trees, existing since the world's creation, are vital for life on earth and serve as mediums for connecting with gods. For example, the myth of Khun Borom describes the tall Khleu Khao Kad vine tree, created from a dried buffalo sent by Thaen to the human world. This tree, which separates the sky and earth, also facilitates communication between realms. The Khleu Khao Kad tree, akin to a "World-tree," stretches from the human world to the heavenly realm.

It is noted that myths from other cultures also portray large trees as mediums for communication between the human and heavenly worlds and as boundaries between heaven and earth. The Sia Mong people in southern Thailand, for instance, tell of a large tree on Mount Naijahai that reaches heaven (Srisawat, 2002). Similarly, a Norwegian myth describes an olive tree as a gateway between the three realms: heaven, earth, and hell, with roots reaching an underground spring, the universe's origin (Editor's Team, 1998). The Lua people in northern Thailand have a myth where the Lua's governor uses a large tree as a ladder to the heavenly city, further illustrating the tree's symbolic role in fertility, water storage, and as a route to other realms.

Second, The Tree as Representative of Humanity and the Supernatural

In Lao myths and beliefs, the creation of humanity is closely linked to the story of Phaya Taen Luang who created Khleu Khao Kad that gives Nam Tao Pung or water gourd. This gourd plays a pivotal role in the origin of various races in Southeast Asia. The myth narrates that the ancestors of the people on both sides of the Mekong River were born from a Nam Tao Pung (Pung means large and significant). This ancient myth is ingrained in the memory of the Tai-Lao people, recounting the story of "Taen" and humanity's genesis from the gourd.

The Lan Xang Chronicles describe three enormous water gourd fruits. When these gourds ripened, Pu Lang Seng burned a sharp iron bar to open them, resulting in a multitude of people emerging from the gourds over three days and nights. This myth about the gourd symbolizes the origin of ethnic groups in Laos and portrays Khleu Khao Kad tree as a cosmic tree integral to human creation according to Lao beliefs.

Besides, Lao people believe that Phaya Taen, the god of the sky, separated the human world from the sky world by cutting down the great tree of Khleu Khao Kad. As recounted in the myth of PuYer YaYer, these grandparents felled a massive tree that obstructed sunlight from reaching the earth. By doing so, they allowed light and warmth to enter the human world, facilitating the creation of cities and enabling people to thrive. The branches of this enormous tree extended to many mountains, creating forests across the world (Tebsimuang, 2011). Consequently, Lao people in the past revered these vast trees as sacred creations of Phaya Taen, endowed with long life and profound significance. The diversity of plant life was believed to stem from the cosmic trees that PuYer YaYer adorned and transformed into the tree of life, a vital element in the formation of cities and human existence. These narratives form an integral part of the Lao religious belief system.

Moreover, certain Lao myths emphasize the importance of trees in the birth of cultural leaders. Trees are depicted as symbols of leadership within the original community, possessing sacred powers that protect cultural figures. For instance, the myth of Khun Thung narrates the story of a city lord's son who married a Naga queen. When the Naga queen returned to her homeland, she laid her egg in Thung leaves. The egg eventually hatched, giving birth to Khun Thung, a hero of the Lao people (Phra Samana Kulwong, 1968). This myth highlights the protective and nurturing role of large trees in the early lives of cultural leaders, who later rose to prominence as great kings.

Additionally, Lao cultural identity is intimately connected with the Champa Lao tree, a revered symbol believed to be sacred since the era of the first king, Chao Fa Ngum. The Lao people have a tradition of floating white Champa flowers in scented water during the water-pouring ceremony on Songkran Day, which involves bathing the Buddha image. They construct a bridge shaped like a Naga, with a groove in the middle of the branches called "Hang Hot Song." This allows the sacred water, infused with white Champa flowers, to flow over the Buddha image, turning it into consecrated water. This sacred water is then collected and often taken home by the villagers. Some people use it to bathe themselves, believing it will bring good fortune to their lives and families.



Figure 2. A wooden bathing rail in the shape of a Naga and the use of a wooden bathing rail in the shape of a Naga in the Lao New Year festival in Luang Prabang.

Besides the Champaka tree, Lao people also hold deep respect for the rice plant, symbolically revered as a goddess who nourishes humanity, referred to as “Mae Khao” or “Mae Phosop.” This belief extends to the idea that rice provides sustenance not only as food but also as rice milk for nursing mothers, enhancing their ability to nourish their children. It is believed that if a new mother lacks sufficient milk, consuming rice milk or sticky rice water can increase her milk supply. Thus, the rice plant in Lao culture symbolizes nourishment and ancestral lineage, akin to a forebear who has sustained people since ancient times. This is reflected in the northern Thai myth of the first Muli, which portrays trees as crucial food sources for the primordial human couple responsible for creating the world.

In the Laotian myth of wonderful nature (Keribun, 2006: 23-25), an elderly woman is deeply respected by her community for her profound connection to nature. She ventured deep into the forest, returning with a compassionate heart and a deep love for nature, including trees, forests, mountains, and all animals. This myth underscores the intimate and harmonious relationship between humans and the ecosystem.

Moreover, trees in Lao culture are also associated with the belief in ancestral spirits (Phi Pu ta), particularly in the Isan community in Thailand, a large Lao ethnic group. Ancestral spirit shrines, often located under large trees like banyan, paduak, or rubber trees, are considered sacred. These trees are believed to house spirits or deities, and the location of ancestral shrines is thought to be chosen by the ancestors themselves. The Don Pu Ta Forest, viewed by villagers not just as a source of food or shelter for wildlife, but as a domain of spirits and supernatural powers, exemplifies this belief. When humans enter the forest, they are seen as being under the care of these spirits. Thus, before clearing land for farming or establishing a community in the forest, villagers seek permission from the forest spirits. This belief system, as noted by Smith (1978: 88), creates a symbiotic relationship between people and the forest, expressed through various rituals and beliefs. It highlights the notion that trees not only sustain the soul but also serve as a sacred food source, integral to traditional rituals and the social structure.

The sacred is often intertwined with social practices and the presence of religious communities, groups, or spiritual leaders. The worship, rituals, and dedications of community members contribute to the sanctification of a place, reinforcing its sacredness through these practices. This concept aligns with the local myth of Chiang Mai, which describes city spirits participating in rituals as “Phumi Thap” and “Rukkha Thap,” guardians of the sacred tree known as “Mai Sri Luang Chen Mueang” (Kanchanaphan, 1999: 152-153). These local spirits are also perceived as the city’s pillar, symbolizing its foundation and protection. This perspective is consistent with Vatn (2016), who argues that beliefs and religions regulate social life through established norms and expectations within specific cultural or regional contexts. Religion, therefore, can function as both a formal and informal regulatory body of knowledge. Similarly, Hongsuwan (2005) highlights that sacred place, whether natural features, expansive areas, or bodies of water, hold special spiritual significance for people and their communities.

The notion of sacred trees representing ethnic or social groups is an ancient concept found in many cultures worldwide. Ancestors, often revered as deities, are believed to oversee the life, death, and overall well-being—both physical and spiritual—of their community members.

Third, The Tree as Representative of Fertility and Prosperity

Trees play a pivotal role in society, communities, and individual lives across various cultures. Their symbolism has been deeply rooted in human traditions for centuries. Beyond providing aesthetic beauty, trees offer shelter and protection from environmental dangers, which explains their long history of symbolic and spiritual significance worldwide. In Lao culture, the traditional beliefs highlight the importance of trees and their associated myths, reflecting their integral role since ancient times. The cultural significance assigned to trees over the centuries underscores their importance in human life. This deep connection is evident in the curiosity people have about various plants, particularly large trees with extensive branches that cover vast areas. Lao myths and beliefs have prominently featured stories about large trees for generations. Often, the growth and health of trees are linked to fertility and water sources. For instance, the Isan people, an ethnic Lao group in Thailand, venerate the god of the forest who resides in the large trees of their community. These sacred trees are believed to possess the power to bring seasonal rain and water (Hongsuwan, 2018). Additionally, Lao beliefs hold that the shape and health of a tree's trunk and branches can indicate the fertility of the surrounding land and water sources. A dry, withered tree is seen as a sign of land suffering from drought, whereas a lush, green tree signifies a bountiful and fertile environment. It is believed that trees receive water from the sky, bestowed by the gods, to mitigate drought and promote prosperity.

In Lao culture, large trees hold a special and respected status due to their propensity to grow in significant numbers, forming forests that are intrinsically linked to water sources. The imagery of a large tree carries profound symbolic meanings across various human cultures, inspiring numerous myths and beliefs. Trees often symbolize life and growth, as illustrated in several Lao myths, such as the tale of Phaya Kan Khak, who contended with Phaya Thaen Luang to bring rain to the human realm. This myth involves creating a rocket from wood and bamboo to signal Phaya Thaen, the god, to send rain (Saisri, 2012). Consequently, the rocket, composed of natural materials, symbolizes a connection to nature and the supernatural forces that control rain and thunder.

In Lao myths and beliefs, the gourd tree is frequently depicted as a symbol of human life's genesis, embodying fertility and prosperity. As a member of the melon family, the gourd plant carries symbolic significance through its fruit, which can hold water akin to a mother's womb and contains numerous seeds. This symbolism conveys notions of physical and spiritual abundance for both the people and the nation.

This reasoning aligns with Disthapan's (2001) interpretation, which suggests that the gourd's depiction in myths of human origins among Mekong River Basin inhabitants likely stems from its round, swollen shape, reminiscent of a pregnant woman's belly. Thus, the gourd may symbolize femininity or motherhood. Many origin myths from various cultures mention living beings emerging from gourds. The association of gourds with femininity extends beyond their womb-like shape to their resemblance to women's breasts, reinforcing their symbolic connection to female attributes.

The symbolism of trees as auspicious locations for cities is evident in various cultural narratives. For example, the myth of Luang Prabang illustrates the city's establishment on the left bank of the Mekong River, where the Khan River flows into the Mekong to the north. This confluence, near the ancient Wat Xieng Thong temple, was historically a gold mine with a significant golden tree. After the tree was felled, the mine was filled with soil, and a temple was erected on the site. This narrative underscores the golden tree's role as a sacred entity with the power to ensure the city's prosperity.

Similarly, in the Tai Khen culture of Chiang Tung, Burma, there is veneration for a large rubber tree, known as “Mai Mai Muang” which means the important tree landmark of the city. This tree, integral to the Chiang Tung community for centuries, serves as a symbol marking the city's location. Historically, the area surrounding the tree was considered sacred, believed to be inhabited by spirits, and was used by the royalty as an execution ground. A ghost hall once stood in the vicinity of this tree, reinforcing its association with supernatural powers. The large rubber tree of Chiang Tung shares similarities with the Lao golden tree, both being sources of sacred and supernatural significance.

These examples reflect the deeply ingrained belief that trees are linked to fertility and prosperity. In many cultures within the region, the concept of sex is intertwined with fertility, as evidenced by the symbolic meanings attributed to trees and forests. Consequently, the representation of trees in myths and rituals is

often connected to notions of fertility and prosperity, highlighting their critical role in the cultural and spiritual landscapes of these communities.

Fourth, The Tree as Representative of The Buddha and The Teachings of Buddhism

For Buddhists, the Bodhi tree symbolizes both the origin of all life and the tree of enlightenment. This stems from the Buddha's vow made at the base of the Bodhi tree, often referred to as the tree of wisdom, where he pledged to remain until achieving the highest enlightenment. It was under this tree that the Buddha attained enlightenment. However, following his enlightenment, the Buddha faced temptations and threats from the Maras, malevolent entities who attempted to destroy the sacred Bodhi tree (Frese & Gray, 1995: 26-33).

The Bodhi tree, sometimes known as the “Sri Maha Bodhi Tree” or the “Bodhi Throne,” is revered as the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Its Pali name is “Assattha,” and collectively, it is called “Atsattha Phruetk.” To commemorate the Buddha’s enlightenment, it is referred to as “Bodhi,” meaning enlightenment, and sometimes referred to as “Bodhipruk” (Panyanupab, 1997: 204).

Worshipping and caring for the Bodhi tree is believed to bring prosperity to individuals and communities, a belief universally held among Buddhists. It is said, “As Hindus wish to bathe in the sacred Ganges River in Varanasi, so do Sri Lankans (Buddhists) wish to pay homage to the Bodhi tree” (Bodhikun, 2002: 175). The Bodhi tree symbolizes Buddhism, possessing both power and majesty that transcend ordinary trees. This belief is reflected in the Tipayadana scripture, where the Buddha’s disciples requested the planting of a Bodhi tree at the Jetavana gate as a place of worship and protection. The Buddha consented, declaring, “This place will be our permanent residence” (Auboyer, 1949: 73 cited in Snodgrass, 1998: 218).

Similarly, in the Kalinga Bodhi Jataka, Ananda asked the Buddha to designate a sacred object or symbol for devotees to make offerings in his absence. The Buddha responded, “A tree is the most appropriate representation of him, both during his lifetime and after his passing”.

Snodgrass (1998: 218) examined the symbolic system in Buddhism, noting that the Bodhi tree's association with the Buddha’s enlightenment has led to its worship as a symbol of that significant event. The narrative of the 49-day bliss of liberation following enlightenment frequently mentions the Bodhi tree. It is said that the Buddha gazed at the Bodhi tree without blinking for seven days, performed walking meditation starting from it, and while sitting under the Bodhi tree, he overcame the Mara after receiving food from Sujata. This illustrates the profound connection between the Buddha and the Bodhi tree, with each representing the other.

In Lao myths, the Bodhi tree is depicted as a sacred and supernatural representation of the Lord Buddha as well. It is regarded as a magical tree capable of bringing happiness and prosperity to its worshippers. Lao people often plant Bodhi trees in temples, sometimes acquiring species from Sri Lanka or India, linking it to the spread of Buddhism. For instance, the myth of That Ing Hang in Savannakhet Province, Laos, recounts how the Lord Buddha traveled by air to the Mekong River and rested under the Rang tree (Sala tree), pronounced as “Ton Hung” in Lao. He declared that after his passing, his relics would be enshrined there. When the Rang tree eventually died, a Maha Bodhi tree appeared in its place, and the site became known as “That Ing Hang.”

The Bodhi tree is considered the main pillar of Buddhism, symbolizing a bridge between the mundane realm of samsara and the supramundane realm of nirvana. It forms the foundation of the Buddhist universe. In Thai-Lao cultural paintings, the Bodhi tree is often depicted at the top, representing the Bodhi throne where the Buddha resides. These paintings narrate the story of Mara demanding possession of the Bodhi throne. The Buddha, invoking the Mother Earth goddess as a witness to his meritorious deeds, led to the goddess squeezing her hair bun and releasing water, ultimately defeating Mara's army.



Figure 3. A mural painting of the Buddha sitting on a Bodhi throne in a temple with the Mother Earth goddess squeezing her hair and pouring water to flood the demons and finally defeat them and the sculpture of the Mother Earth goddess squeezing her hair bun, acting as the guardian in front of the ordination hall, a contemporary Lao art work.

The symbolism of the Bodhi tree as a central pillar in Buddhist iconography is significant. In artistic depictions, the Buddha is often shown seated under the Bodhi tree, with its trunk serving as a pillar that connects humanity to the Buddha. This connection represents a metaphysical ladder leading to the ultimate goal in Buddhism, Nirvana. Thus, the Bodhi tree symbolizes the path and bridge between the sacred and the mundane, forming the center of the universe.

In Lao myths and beliefs, the Bodhi tree frequently appears in narratives related to the Buddha's life and teachings. For instance, the myth of Phra Chao Liap Lok describes the Buddha's travels to various cities in the Mekong River basin, including Laos. According to the myth, the Buddha left his footprints and planted a branch of the Bodhi tree where he attained enlightenment in each city, thereby ensuring peace, happiness, and good fortune for the people and their communities. This recurring motif highlights the Bodhi tree as a sacred symbol directly associated with the Buddha and his teachings (Chantawan, 2011: 17). Moreover, the planting of Bodhi trees in different regions symbolizes the spread of Buddhism, analogous to the growth and expansion of many branches.

The appearance of the Bodhi tree in Laotian lands is often accompanied by myths depicting initial environments of chaos and disorder. These narratives suggest that before the acceptance of Buddhism, these areas lacked organized cities and community structure. However, following the introduction of Buddhism symbolized by the Bodhi tree, these regions transformed into orderly communities where people could live harmoniously. This transformation can be interpreted in Buddhist terms, with the Bodhi tree symbolizing a pillar of light that dispels the darkness of human life, where darkness represents ignorance, craving, and lust, and the Bodhi tree represents the Dharma, connecting the mundane and transcendental worlds.

Wongthet (1988: 134) describes the beliefs surrounding the Bodhi tree among the Lao Phuan community in Prachin Buri Province. This community holds the ancient Sri Maha Bodhi tree in high regard, believing it to be sacred, with seeds originally obtained from Bodhi Gaya. Legends state that during full moons, the tree emanated sounds of gongs, drums, and lutes. The Bodhi leaves were so large that they could be used to wrap rice for eating. It was believed that Bodhi leaves had healing properties; sick individuals would worship or soak the leaves in water to drink for a cure. The tree was also believed to reveal immoral acts, with branches breaking and pointing toward the wrongdoer. The presence of the "Lord of the Bodhi Tree" was thought to protect and bring prosperity to the town. Consequently, Wat Ton Pho became the origin of various traditions, a central place for merit-making during festivals, and a significant symbol for the local people. The sacredness and belief in the Bodhi tree deeply connect to the cultural and social dimensions of the Lao Phuan community.

This characteristic reflects the Lao ethnic group's reverence for the Bodhi tree, which is not only a symbol of Buddhist beliefs but also a sacred entity that acts as a "guardian spirit of the city." The community refers to it as the "Lord of the Bodhi Tree," indicating its role in protecting and caring for the people and the

community. This belief aligns with the broader tradition of city spirits or guardian spirits, seen in many Tai ethnic cultures. For instance, the Tai Khen people in Burma have ceremonies dedicated to the city spirit in Chiang Tung. Similarly, in the area of Wat Phra Chao Ton Luang and Wat Hua Khuang, a large Bodhi tree known as “Mai Sali Jai Mueang” stands, under which a shrine called “Ho Thewada or Jai Mueang” is located (Hongsuwan, 2005: 209-214).

It is important to note that while the worship of trees or nature as sacred is prevalent, Buddhist scriptures highlight that such refuges do not lead to ultimate happiness or the cessation of suffering. The Dhammapada states, “*Many people, threatened by fear, take refuge in mountains, forests, gardens, and sacred trees. Those things are not a safe refuge at all. They are not the perfect refuge. People who take refuge in such places will not be free from all suffering*” (Phra Dhamma Pitaka, 2000). This suggests that while the Bodhi tree holds significant moral power as a representative of the Buddha and Buddhism, it also symbolizes a sacred space inhabited by ghosts and supernatural powers. Consequently, the Bodhi tree represents the intersection of Buddhism, divine dwelling, and the supernatural power that sustains life in the universe.

Conclusion and Discussions

The analysis of tree motifs in Lao myths and local beliefs offers a comprehensive understanding of their symbolic roles and meanings, which can be categorized into four primary aspects. First, they represent the universe and life: Trees in Lao myths symbolize the cosmos and various life phenomena, including the genesis of the world, human life, and natural occurrences such as day and night, wind, sky, and weather. The concept of the “World Tree” or “Tree of the Universe” often depicts an ancient tree serving as a conduit between different realms or worlds. This sacred tree, created by deities to give birth to humans and establish cities, underscores its significance in the surreal dimension linked to the imaginative creation within beliefs. Second, they represent humanity and the supernatural: Trees are also symbolic of humanity and supernatural entities. Lao myths frequently present trees as sources of life and ethnicity, bearing fruit that gives rise to various ethnic groups such as Thais, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Khmers. This imagery reflects the sacred role and symbolic meaning of trees in relation to the revered supernatural world, particularly the deity “*Phaya Taen Luang*,” who possesses the power to create and destroy worlds.

Third, trees represent fertility and prosperity: Trees are associated with fertility and prosperity in Lao culture. The belief that “trees give life and water” highlights their importance as sources of natural resources essential for survival. Lao myths often depict lush forests and thriving trees as indicators of a prosperous and content community. Sacred trees, considered city protectors, are believed to bring good fortune. Festivals such as the Phra Wet Festival, the Flower Parade Festival, the Bun Bang Fai Festival, and the Songkran Festival frequently incorporate tree symbols to celebrate fertility and city prosperity.

Fourth, trees are intimately linked with the Buddha and Buddhist teachings. Numerous Lao myths and beliefs illustrate this connection, such as the creation of Buddha images from hardwood for worship in Lao households. The Lao version of the Phra That Phanom myth, for instance, describes the Rang and Bodhi trees as representations of Buddha’s lineage, contributing to the name of the Lao King “*Phra Phothisarat*.” Trees like the Bodhi tree are planted to commemorate Buddha and his teachings, symbolizing cultural meanings as they are recurrent in Buddha’s life events—birth, enlightenment, and nirvana. Additionally, some myths often portray the Buddha or Bodhisattva incarnating as trees, like the four Champa trees or Phra Lak Phra Lam’s tale where Hanuman gains strength from a magical tree. Myths such as Khulu Nang Ua further depict trees as mediums that bridge the profane and the sacred worlds, facilitating the transition from the cycle of reincarnation to enlightenment in Buddhist belief. This multi-faceted representation of trees in Lao culture not only highlights their spiritual and cultural significance but also illustrates their profound connection to the cosmic, supernatural, and everyday aspects of life in Lao society.

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