COMPARISON OF THE RELIGIOUS MEANING OF WATER FESTIVALS IN THAILAND AND LAOS

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ABSTRACT
Both Thailand and Laos are predominantly Buddhist countries, following Theravada Buddhism. Influenced by Indian Buddhism, both countries celebrate several similar festivals, such as Songkran, Makha Bucha, Visakha Bucha, and Vixakha Souvana. Among all these celebrations, Songkran is considered the most lively, and this is the focus of this article. The article compares and analyzes the culture of Songkran in Laos and Thailand, including the festival's themes, cultural significance, and activities, to highlight the similarities and differences between the two. The cultural significance found in the Water Festival primarily stems from Indian cultural influences, while the differences in meaning are attributed to the adoption of Hindu culture after it entered Thailand and Laos. In the process of integration with local culture, the festival forms a unique cultural significance. By comparing the same festival, this article reveals differences and similarities in their cultural meanings, enhancing understanding of both cultures and contributing to friendly cultural exchange between the two countries.

KEYWORDS: comparative analysis, festival culture, Songkran in Thailand, Boun Pi Mai in Laos.

INTRODUCTION
Thailand and Laos, as neighbors, have a history of exchange spanning thousands of years, with many shared cultural and historical roots. They have more similarities in terms of cultural and historical roots. The Water Festival is a traditional celebration in both Thailand and Laos, usually held during the New Year. In Thailand, the festival is known as Songkran, while in Laos, the activity is called Pi Mai. This festival symbolizes the cleansing of sins from the previous year and welcoming the new year. People splash water on each other in the streets as a symbol of blessings and soul purification.

Thailand and Laos share a geographical border, but due to historical, cultural, religious, and other factors, both have developed unique cultural traditions. The Water
Festival has a strong religious background, and by comparing the water festivals, we can highlight the cultural similarities and differences between these two countries. We can also discuss how Buddhism influences the celebration activities and related ceremonies. This helps unearth the unique cultural elements of both nations, emphasizing how these religious traditions are reflected in the celebrations and how they blend with local culture.

This article will analyze the following questions: 1. "What are the similarities and differences between the Water Festivals in Thailand and Laos?" 2. "How do the Water Festivals in Thailand and Laos share similarities and differences?" 3. "In what ways do the Water Festivals in Thailand and Laos reflect similar and different cultural elements?"

The following articles are used as analysis material in this writing. Wang Guanyuan (2016) examines the origins and changes of the Water Splashing Festival, with a specific focus on its relationship with religion. (G.-Y. Wang, 2016) Chu J (2010) analyzes the historical origins of the Water Festival, exploring myths associated with the festival and its connection to the lunar calendar. (Chu J, 2010) Kislenko, A writes a narrative on the folk tales and cultural aspects of the Water Festival in Thailand. (Kislenko, 2004) Agarwal explains the relationship between the Songkran Festival in Thailand and Hinduism, providing examples of the history of introducing legends and the dates of the Thai Water Festival. (Agarwal, 2009) Wang Ying investigates the origins and development of Songkran, the values or meanings of Songkran (family, community, and social values, including religious values), the main significance of Songkran activities, modern influences, as well as preservation and development. (Y. Wang, n.d.)

Lao, L. N. Y. P. M. analyzes the significance of the Water Festival in Laos. (Lao, 2021) Pholsena, V. analyzes traditional Lao culture after World War II and provides an introduction to the cultural history of Laos. (Pholsena, 2006) Rehbein, B. examines traditional practices in Laos and the changes in traditional culture and social structures in the process of globalization. (Rehbein, 2007)

Although there have been studies on Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos, there is still a gap in research that thoroughly compares the cultural meanings of these two festivals. Most studies tend to discuss the cultural festivals of each country separately. Therefore, from a cultural comparative perspective, this research aims to delve deeper and analyze Songkran in Thailand and Pi Mai Lao, contributing to the understanding and cultural exchange between the two nations.

**METHOD**

This article will employ a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is based on the theoretical foundation of interpretivism, emphasizing careful investigation and research on various matters, reproducing the perspectives of involved parties, and focusing on description and interpretation rather than hypothesis verification (Sun, 2014). Qualitative research emphasizes in-depth exploration of various aspects, focusing on description and explanation. This method aids in a deeper understanding of cultural differences in the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos, including detailed observation and explanation related to religion, myths, and the content of activities.

Simultaneously, this method also facilitates a comprehensive understanding of social activities, not only concentrating on the events themselves but also on the cultural, social, and historical elements behind them. This helps provide a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the Water Festival.

In the data analysis process, the author will use data transcription methods to analyze the cultural activities and customary practices displayed in Songkran videos in Thailand and Laos. In this data analysis process, the author will translate the Chinese-language content obtained from various videos into Indonesian and then translate it from...
This article utilizes secondary data as a research material source. The author employs a thematic model to collect data from videos. The sources of the author's secondary data include information obtained from books, reports, journals, literature, and videos. The primary video sources come from YouTube.

The videos featuring the Songkran festival in Thailand are presented by Tai Guo Lv Xing. The videos record parades, traditional ceremonies, and water battle scenes. The links to the videos are as follows:
1. Parade, traditional ceremonies, and water battle: [https://youtu.be/GFzerz-4wS0?si=T21J-lvkf_0G7z8U](https://youtu.be/GFzerz-4wS0?si=T21J-lvkf_0G7z8U) (Tai Guo Lv Xing, 2023a)
2. Traditional rituals at a Thai temple: [https://youtu.be/RuIppJp8gYe?si=oOCYt8MVDYxslAir](https://youtu.be/RuIppJp8gYe?si=oOCYt8MVDYxslAir) (Tai Guo Lv Xing, 2023b)

The video showcasing Luang Prabang Laos' Pimai festival is:
2. Another video by the same YouTuber documents Buddha watering ceremonies in Laos: [https://youtu.be/A4mlSwUnIHk?si=t7fx5gp8uLxq6lCP](https://youtu.be/A4mlSwUnIHk?si=t7fx5gp8uLxq6lCP) (Best of the world 4k, 2022).

The steps of data analysis in this research are as follows:
1. The author first collects data by gathering videos of the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos from YouTube.
2. The author will transcribe the videos using a data transcription method, converting spoken language and other relevant information in the videos into written text.
3. The author will translate the text. Some data in the videos are in Chinese, so it needs to be translated from Chinese to Indonesian and then from Indonesian to English. This helps ensure understanding and explanation of the video content in further analysis.
4. The author will conduct a comparative analysis, comparing the customs and activities of the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos. Discussing similarities and differences, especially in cultural aspects, traditions, rituals, and participant behavior. Using data and video excerpts as examples to explain the differences and similarities in the Water Festival in the two countries.
5. The author will explain the results, highlighting cultural differences and similarities between the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos, and providing an in-depth explanation of the reasons for the differences in the Water Festival.
6. The author will summarize and provide recommendations: Summarizing the main findings of the research, discussing the importance of comparative analysis, and proposing reasons for the differences in the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos, along with directions for future research.
DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Although both Thailand and Laos celebrate the Water Festival, this writing will first discuss the mythological context of the Water Festival in Thailand and Laos, as well as the introduction of the festival's origins. Next, the author will explore the influence of the religious system on the culture and ceremonies of the Songkran Festival in Thailand and Laos, detailing the ceremonies held in both countries during the Water Festival and explaining the reasons and cultural significance behind some specific ceremonies.

After explaining how both countries celebrate the Water Festival, the author will present a table that clearly shows the differences and similarities in Water Festival activities in both countries. Through the content of the table, this writing will conduct an in-depth analysis to uncover cultural differences behind the meaning of the Water Festival, with the aim of highlighting the uniqueness of both cultures.

The Mythology of Songkran in Thailand

In the 13th century CE, King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai Dynasty in Thailand designated Theravada Buddhism as the official state religion and introduced the tradition of the "Songkran Festival." Initially, the Songkran Festival was held in June in the Buddhist calendar, with the purpose of praying for rain before the rainy season to ensure a bountiful harvest. With economic developments, the festival is now held annually from April 13th to 15th, spanning three days (G.-Y. Wang, 2016).

In the Thai solar calendar, twelve months correspond to twelve zodiac signs, and the days of the week follow the solar calendar using the names of planets to designate each day. In the traditional Thai New Year celebration, "Songkran" signifies a transition, indicating that on that day, the sun moves from the Pisces constellation to Aries, making day and night equal in length (Agarwal, 2009).

The most popular myth about the Songkran Festival in Thailand originates from a stela (stone inscription) at Wat Pho in Bangkok. The story narrates the tale of a wealthy individual who made sacred offerings to obtain a male heir and was eventually granted a magical son named "Kuma." Kuma won a contest of wits against a prophet and showcased his extraordinary intelligence. After defeating the prophet, Kuma beheaded him, but due to its malevolent nature, the head could cause disasters. In the end, seven princesses placed the head in a bowl, and the bowl spun around Mount Meru to avert calamities. Subsequently, a deity of architecture built a palace for the head, allowing the gods to gather and celebrate this victory, and the festival was named "Songkran" (Chinese culture for children, 2021). This festival has been passed down through generations, becoming a significant tradition for the people of Thailand to celebrate the New Year while carrying the symbolic meaning of prayers for rain and a prosperous harvest.

The Mythology of Pi Mai in Laos

The term "Pi Mai Lao" or "Songkan" originates from the Sanskrit language of India, specifically "Sangknanta." In the year 1353 CE, King Fa Ngum of the Lan Xang Kingdom in Laos introduced Theravada Buddhism as the official religion, designating it as the "national religion." The native Indian language evolved into the "mother tongue" of the nation. Consequently, Buddhist traditions and folk festivals became integral to the cultural traditions of Laotian society. According to the Lao calendar, the Water Sprinkling Festival takes place in May, also referred to as the "May Festival." In the Gregorian calendar, the festival is held from the 13th to the 15th or 14th to the 16th of April, spanning three days (Chu J, 2010). This three-day water festival is known as "Vanmaha Songkan" (LNTV ENGLISH NEWS, 2015).

On the first day, known as "Vanmaha Songkan" or "Defending the Year," it signifies
the beginning of the transition from the old year to the new year. The second day, called "Vannao" or "Empty Sky," reflects the movement of the sun between the old and the new year. On the third day, known as "Vankuen sok" or "Vantalerk sok," it indicates that the sun has entered the Aries constellation, marking the start of the new year.

According to legend, a husband and wife in ancient times prayed multiple times to have a son. Their prayers were answered, and they named their son TanmaBalaGuman, meaning a son protected by the law. He was intelligent and brave, learning about the teachings of Buddhism since childhood and considering himself a monk proficient in words and laws. Later, the Western Kabin deity challenged him with three difficult questions, with a wager that if the son could answer correctly, the deity would be willing to cut off his own head as a sign of loyalty. However, if the son failed to answer, his head would be severed.

Unable to answer immediately, the son requested seven days to think about it, and the deities agreed. Six days later, he quietly left. While resting under a coconut tree, a hawk informed him of the answers. The next day, the son provided the correct answers, and the deities acknowledged their defeat. The deities then beheaded themselves, asking seven princesses to place their heads in a divine bowl to avoid disasters and praying for the new year to bring good weather and abundant harvests (Pholsena, 2006).

The Religious System Mentions Culture and Ceremonies at the Songkran Festival

Festival Songkran in Thailand is a traditional celebration that spans three days, symbolizing the transition between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. On April 13th, marking the end of the old year, a merit-making ritual is held in the morning, involving the cleaning of Buddha statues and a city procession to express reverence for Buddha (Kislenko, 2004). On April 14th, families gather to prepare offerings, build a "sand stupa" for Buddha, and participate in the water-sprinkling celebration. April 15th is the Thai New Year, where people engage in acts of kindness, worship ancestors, listen to Buddha's teachings, and partake in the sacred water-sprinkling, reflecting traditional ceremonial practices.

According to the YouTuber Black Bear v Thailand, the Water Festival in Thailand involves not only water splashing but also various traditional rituals. In the video, the process of building sand stupas, the ceremony of applying powder, bathing Buddha statues, the ritual of water splashing, and other ceremonies are explained (Hei Xiong V Thai Guo, 2022). Here is a summary of ten main rituals and traditions mentioned:

- Making Cakes: Thai people enjoy delicious cakes, and Songkran is a special time for making and giving cakes. The cakes, primarily made from brown glutinous rice, symbolize tradition and craftsmanship. They are given to friends and family and offered to Buddha, reflecting acts of kindness.
- Building Sand Stupas: The activity of "building sand stupas" is a traditional Thai ritual that originated from the Hindu custom of bringing sand home after paying respects at a Buddha temple. People bring containers to the river to collect sand, which is then used to repair Buddha temples or other structures. This act is seen as a good deed and an expression of love for the community and places of worship.
- Releasing Living Beings (Birds, Fish): In the past, an old monk in a temple predicted that the life of a young novice would soon end and allowed him to return home to visit his family. While on the journey home, the young novice saved a group of fish, surprising the old monk. From this act of kindness, the old monk realized that his life could be prolonged. The story spread, and people began to imitate it, forming the tradition of releasing living beings.
- Honoring Ancestors: During the Songkran Festival, Thai people conduct ancestor-
honoring ceremonies, and the ritual of chanting mantras for the remaining bones is a traditional Thai practice. By reciting mantras, they seek blessings from their ancestors, expressing respect and longing for the elders. The significance of religion and family togetherness is reflected in this honoring ceremony.

- Powder Smearing Ceremony: The powder smearing ceremony originated from Hindu Brahmanism, using a mixture of spices including cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon, symbolizing protection from the gods. During the Songkran Festival, people receive the powder smearing ceremony at temples or in homes, where the powder signifies a mysterious and devout ritual, cleansing the body and soul while seeking blessings.

- Charity and Blessings: Thai people value charity and blessings, and during the Songkran Festival, they wake up early to go to temples and make donations to monks as an act of kindness. They bring various types of offerings, including daily necessities, scented candles, fresh flowers, and more. The donation ceremony promotes community togetherness and reflects the devotion of the people to Buddhist principles.

- Songkran Beauty Pageant: The Songkran beauty pageant takes center stage, especially featuring participants from the "kathoey" community (transgender women). Beautifully decorated vehicles showcase participants dressed in elaborate attire, with some seated in the center as the "Songkran queen." Contestants wear traditional costumes, and the event includes a fashion show, runway displays, and talent performances. Through the beauty contest, the community showcases cultural diversity and the pursuit of beauty.

- Buddha Bathing and People Bathing: The Buddha bathing ceremony is a tradition before the Songkran Festival, involving the pouring of water over Buddha statues as a symbol of luck and good weather. The act of bathing the Buddha represents a desire for cleanliness and purification, symbolizing a new beginning. The water not only seeks rain for the year but also enhances agricultural yields (Tai Guo Lv Xing, 2023).

- Water Sprinkling Ceremony: The water-sprinkling ceremony and holy water sprinkling in Thailand have roots in Buddhist traditions, replacing direct gift-giving with the act of water sprinkling. This ceremony involves the preparation of fresh flowers, incense, candles, and more, emphasizing the importance of appreciation and friendship. The water-sprinkling ceremony symbolizes gifts conveyed through the act of water sprinkling, and in the water droplet ceremony, parents give blessings to their children, expressing sincere hopes.

- "BAISI" Ceremony: The "BAISI" ceremony is a daily tradition in Thailand used to welcome and bid farewell to relatives. Before the ceremony, preparations are made by setting up items such as an offering table, a banana tree made from banana leaves, and more. After reciting mantras, participants tie scarves around each other, expressing blessings and protection. This ceremony emphasizes social etiquette and the significance of giving blessings to others.

The Religious System Mentions Culture and Ceremonies at the Boun Pi Mai festival

Here is a video introducing the traditions in the Pi Mai Lao celebration. The video includes displays of activities, markets, the construction of sand stupas, animal release celebrations, almsgiving ceremonies, the Songkran Queen parade, string-tying ceremonies, and so on. (LNTV English News, 2015) The author will further analyze in detail the Pi Mai Lao ceremonies mentioned in the video.

- Night Market: On the night before the New Year, the market in Luang Prabang is bustling with activity. People wear festive attire, purchasing various New Year items such as banana leaf towers, decorations, clothing, electronic devices, and other delicious snacks to welcome upcoming guests and provide an opportunity for foreign tourists to
enjoy delightful dishes.

- Building Sand Stupas: Building sand stupas is another important tradition in Laos, stemming from a religious story. King Basanti Gheon, palace officials, and the statue of Buddha Bolong Wong Sanuong entered the Shawati market, saw clean white sand, gathered the sand, and formed it into a stupa named "La Ugta," symbolizing respect for Buddha and the monks. At noon, people gather by the riverbank, forming half-sphere sand structures and towers, placing offerings around them, inviting monks to recite sutras, and singing and dancing together to express beliefs and hopes for a good harvest in the new year. (LNTV ENGLISH NEWS, 2015)

- Animal Liberation Celebration: The Laos Animal Liberation Celebration takes place on New Year's Eve, where people release various types of live animals, such as fish and birds, representing kindness and protection towards life. The floating candle ceremony using banana leaf lanterns is placed into the Mekong River, symbolizing peace and prosperity. Prayers are offered for the new year to eliminate disasters and provide courage to face the future. (Lao, 2021)

- Lantern Parade: Lantern parades made of banana leaves float into the Mekong River, symbolizing peace and prosperity. Prayers are made for the new year to eradicate disasters and provide courage for facing the future.

- Rocket Ceremony: The rocket ceremony symbolizes the hope of reaching new heights. Rockets made from a mixture of bat droppings, charcoal, and sulfur are lit and launched into the air. The increase in height is considered an auspicious sign for the new year, signifying good luck. A food offering ceremony is held on the fourth day of the New Year, where the community prepares delicious meals for monks, expressing their respect for the monks. This event is lively and grand.

- Fourth-Day New Year Food Offering Ceremony: On the fourth day of the New Year, the food offering ceremony is a lively event. At 6 in the morning, each family brings fruits, cakes, and other gifts to the riverside, laying out mats and dressing in traditional attire while kneeling. They provide various delicious dishes for the monks, who wear yellow robes and accept offerings from their followers while maintaining proper etiquette and avoiding direct contact.

- Miss Songkran Parade: The Miss Songkran Parade is a crucial part of the New Year celebration, featuring unmarried participants aged 16 to 22, with a minimum height of 1.55 meters, dressed in traditional Laotian attire. The parade involves various performances and decorated Miss Songkran vehicles, carrying beautiful young ladies who sprinkle water on the audience, showcasing traditional clothing and culture. (Rehbein, 2007)

- Buddha Bathing Ceremony: The Buddha bathing ceremony takes place before the Songkran Festival inside Wat Mai, where people decorate the Buddha bathing area, monks recite scriptures, and individuals bow in reverence. After bathing the Buddha statue, people take water home and sprinkle it on the heads of friends and family, hoping for happiness in the new year. (Best of the world 4k, 2022)

- Pi Mai: Water splashing activities commence after the Buddha bathing ceremony, with people joyfully pouring water as a sign of respect while celebrating the festival with music, dance, and laughter, creating a lively festive atmosphere.

- Naga Worship Ceremony: This ceremony is conducted to seek protection and prosperity for the city of Luang Prabang.

- String-Tying Ceremony: The string-tying ceremony is a celebration to welcome guests and relatives, where tying strings is believed to bring good luck.
Comparison between the Songkran Festival in Thailand and the Boun Pi Mai Festival in Laos

To compare the differences and similarities between "Songkran in Thailand" and "Pi Mai Laos" more clearly, here is a comparison table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festival name</th>
<th>Songkran in Thailand</th>
<th>Boun Pi Mai in Laos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Origin of the Feast Day</td>
<td>Hindu Brahmin ceremony</td>
<td>Hindu Brahmin ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar and Implementation Time</td>
<td>Buddhist calendar; Currently using the Gregorian Calendar, each year in mid-April</td>
<td>Buddhist calendar; Currently using the Gregorian Calendar, each year in mid-April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Theravada Buddhism</td>
<td>Theravada Buddhism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos, both as community new year celebrations, are similar in some aspects:

- Beliefs and Origins: Koentjaraningrat stated that religion is a key element in culture. Within this theoretical framework, celebrations often have deep connections with religion (Koentjaraningrat, 1993). Religious ceremonies and festive activities play a significant role, reflecting the local population's reverence for spirits or religious beliefs. The majority of the Thai population practices Buddhism, and Thailand is a country with Buddhism as its official religion. Meanwhile, almost all Laotian residents practice Theravada Buddhism, and both share the belief foundation in Theravada Buddhism. Both celebrations originated from Hindu Brahmanic religious ceremonies in India, becoming cultural products in the spread of Buddhism. For the Thai and Laotian people, both are considered imported items. It is noteworthy that the Buddha statues they use in the bathing tradition are the same, depicting the Sakyamuni statue at the moment of enlightenment, clothed with draped fabric, with one hand pointing to the sky and the other to the earth (Rachelle M. Scott, 2020).

- Scheduling: Buddhists in Thailand and Laos celebrate their festivals following the Buddhist calendar, calculated from the time of Gautama Buddha's parinibbana. The period of their celebrations falls in the sixth month of the Buddhist calendar. With the
development of cultural tourism and the spread of culture, both festivals are now held in mid-April each year according to the Gregorian calendar. Despite variations in timing in some locations, most celebrations span three days, taking place from April 13th to 15th each year. During Songkran, which also coincides with the spring season before planting, and the imminent arrival of the rainy season, they celebrate the festival to symbolize the New Year, bringing rain, successful harvests, and new happiness.

- Activity Content: "Water splashing" is the most important activity, initially involving devout men and women leading the cleaning of temples, cleaning and changing the Buddha statues' clothes, then going to the river for bathing, aiming to cleanse previous sins and seek the blessings of the Buddha. Both celebrations involve grand festive events, mostly related to Buddha, such as baptism festivals, singing and dancing, sand stacking, releasing living beings, water splashing, BASIS ceremony or string-tying ceremony, Miss Songkran parade, living being release events, and more, creating a festive atmosphere akin to an "Eastern Carnival."

- Existence and Functionality Status: With the development of the digital era, both festivals are increasingly exhibiting international trends, attracting global attention. According to Koentjaraningrat's cultural elements from the perspective of the social system, the commercialization of festivals is driven by social and economic changes. Commercialized festivals can bring more benefits to companies and offer more choices and entertainment to consumers. This commercialization behavior may lead to the loss of the festival's essence but can also provide certain benefits to society and the economy. Therefore, commercialized festivals reflect the social system, reflecting social and economic changes and the community's need for entertainment and consumption.

- Water holds a highly sacred symbolic meaning. In Thailand, water is considered an extremely sacred symbol, serving as a bridge connecting humans with the divine. Thai society believes that water is the source of life, and only through communication with water will the gods bless the community with favorable weather. During the Songkran Festival, various activities revolve around water, especially the tradition of "Bathing the Buddha," where followers believe that by bathing the Buddha statue with holy water, they can express sincerity, while monks will bless by sprinkling water as a symbol of divine protection. Water in Thai culture not only has sacred significance but also symbolizes luck, capable of cleansing the soul, dispelling misfortune and sins, bringing luck and peace, and promoting better community connections. The respect and hope for water reflect the deep understanding and reverence of Thai society for water. (Wang, Yin, n.d.)

In Laos, water is seen as a vehicle of luck symbolizing the desire for prosperity and happiness for the nation. In the Pi Mai Lao Water Festival story, three 'lucky' periods are closely associated with water. In mid-April, temperatures peak, and people splash water on each other, conveying blessings, providing energy, and giving a sense of coolness. Water in Lao culture symbolizes life, serving as the foundation for the fate of all living beings that depend on water to survive, be it animals or plants. The legend of the Water Festival reflects the community's drive to achieve happiness in a new life, especially in agrarian societies. In ancient times without adequate technological and astronomical knowledge, the legend of the Water Festival mirrors the hopes and prayers of various ethnic groups in facing the desire to overcome natural forces. Rainfall is crucial for agriculture in the Southeast Asian region, and the Laotian community celebrates the arrival of the rainy season by splashing water, refreshing life, and revitalizing the spirit of living. This tradition combines reverence for water, dependence on life, and expectations for nature. (Non-Profit Organization, n.d.)

Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos, as festivals from different countries and ethnicities, although they have many similarities, they also have differences:
Myths and Legends. Songkran stories in Thailand highlight religion, family, and wisdom, emphasizing the spirit of facing challenges. Boun Pi Mai stories in Laos focus more on nature, agriculture and community, reflecting respect for water sources and crops. This reflects the different cultural values and traditions in the two countries. The Songkran story in Thailand emphasizes the importance of wisdom and courage, revolving mainly around the journey of a wealthy man in search of offspring, and the contest of wits between Guman Thong and Gabin Pong Saint. The story involves mysterious religious elements for example the Sky God Shiva and Gabin Pong Saint, reflecting the important position of Buddhism in Thai culture. The Boun Pi Mai story in Laos emphasizes the importance of water sources and people's desire for a good harvest. The story illustrates the key role of water in agriculture and the wisdom of the villagers in interacting with nature. Through ceremonial worship of the water god, the story reflects respect and trust in nature. The activity of sprinkling water in the story symbolizes cleanliness and prayers for a bountiful harvest in the new year.

Religious Meaning: The Songkran Water Festival in Thailand has a close connection to the Buddhist religion, emphasizing the accumulation of goodness and wisdom. The act of pouring water symbolizes the cleansing of obstacles and evil thoughts, reflecting the purification of the body and soul. Meanwhile, Pi Mai Lao places more emphasis on the concept of karma in Buddhism. Through the water-splashing activities, people express their thoughts and reflections on good and bad deeds.

Activity Content: Elements such as making cakes, paying respect to ancestors, and the ceremony of powder scattering are absent in Boun Pi Mai in Laos. Conversely, activities like traditional markets, floating lantern ceremonies, rocket ceremonies, and dragon homage rituals are not present in Thailand's Songkran festival. These differences in traditions are closely related to the characteristics of the local cultures.

Concept of Space: Koentjaraningrat considers social activities during public festivals as occasions when people gather to celebrate, reflecting social structure and interpersonal relationships. Some festivals may emphasize the importance of family, while others highlight the unity of the entire community, reflecting social beliefs within the society. In Thailand's Songkran festival, people engage in large-scale water battles on the streets, enjoying the pleasure of splashing water. In Pi Mai Lao, individuals tend to participate in water-splashing activities at temples and homes, reflecting a different perspective in Laos regarding private and public spaces.

Culinary Diversity: Laotian cuisine is influenced by a diverse history, blending French, Western, Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian cultures. During the Water Festival, family dishes include traditional sticky rice, meat, fish, and vegetables. In addition to traditional fare, there are also salads, laap, steaks, and modified Korean-style hot pot in Laos. This reflects the integration of cultural elements from various countries in Laos, indicating an open and inclusive society. In Thailand, green vegetables are largely wild, retaining their original flavors. Despite the dominance of foreign foods, many Thai villagers prefer traditional options and reject artificially grown vegetables. Thai people respect nature, believing that food should return to its natural state. Natural water is considered a gift, and thus, they appreciate and consume food that is entirely sourced from nature. This contrasts with Laos, highlighting Thailand's specific respect for nature. Both Thailand and Laos enjoy sour foods, but Thai people prefer a balance of sour, sweet, spicy, and salty flavors. They believe that this variety of tastes reflects a diverse and harmonious life. This not only enriches the palate but also mirrors Thailand's outlook on seeking happiness through experiencing various flavors.

Through the comparison of Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos, we gain a specific understanding and knowledge about the development of ethnic origins,
religious beliefs, and traditional cultural life in Thailand and Laos. With this foundation, through further thought, we can reach the following conclusions. The innovation in this article lies in the detailed comparison between Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos, emphasizing the similarities and differences in various aspects such as religion, timing, activity content, spatial concept, myths, religious meaning, and culinary culture. Such a comprehensive comparison provides a deep understanding to the readers about these two celebrations while highlighting their uniqueness in cultural aspects, beliefs, and celebration practices.

FINDING

Firstly, although both Thailand and Laos have the Songkran celebration, based on the author’s research, the Songkran culture in these two countries does not mutually influence each other. Both festivals are influenced by one of the oldest civilizations in the world, namely India, due to their connection with the Buddhist religion. These celebrations were introduced to two different regions and then integrated with local traditions and the beliefs of the local communities, resulting in different cultural reflections under distinct social environments, historical conditions, and varying cultural influences. Therefore, the water festival gradually undergoes a process of localization.

Secondly, concerning their relationship, the author argues that the Songkran celebration in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos is influenced by the spread of the Buddhist religion from India. This is a cultural phenomenon of New Year celebrations that developed amidst the backdrop of the psychological beliefs of communities adhering to Theravada Buddhism. The celebration evolved from specific points in time based on the Buddhist calendar, commencing with the bathing ritual of the Buddha and transforming into a cultural water festival involving the throwing of water to bestow blessings. This is a cultural phenomenon of New Year celebrations that formed through the historical development and living spaces of each ethnic group, encompassing naturally emerging needs, cultural dialogue, and the simultaneous influence of various factors.

Thirdly, Songkran in Thailand and Laos are traditional celebrations with similar characteristics, but there are differences in religious meaning and the concept of space. For example, Songkran in Thailand symbolizes purification from all evils, misfortunes, and sins, welcoming all that is good and clean. During Songkran, people splash water on each other to convey blessings and good wishes, with even young couples using water to express their love for each other. In contrast, the Pi Mai Lao celebration emphasizes religious activities such as visiting temples and offering alms to monks, rather than playing with water and other forms of celebration.

Fourthly, the differences in ethnic psychology are reflected in the different origin myths of Songkran in Laos and Thailand. The origin myth of Songkran in Laos is more oriented towards Buddhist teachings, depicting either the battle of wisdom between Tamawala and the gods or the actions of the seven goddesses, both closely emphasizing the spirit of "seeking mercy from Buddha." Meanwhile, the origin myth of Songkran in Thailand highlights the significance of the battle between good and evil, reflecting the spirit of courage among the Thai people. Different cultural roots and subsequent developments have varying impacts on ethnic psychology in Laos and Thailand.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

By comparing the water festivals in Thailand and Laos, the author believes that Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos share similarities and differences in cultural meanings and cultural roots. The commonality in cultural content arises from the
fact that the Water Festival was introduced to both countries by the Buddhist religion from India. However, the difference lies in the fact that after the introduction of Indian culture to Thailand and Laos, it underwent a process of accommodation and adaptation to local culture. Therefore, the Water Festival reflects unique cultural content in each country. The similarities include cultural meanings such as blessings for good weather, abundant harvests, warding off diseases and disasters, living happily and prosperously, honoring ancestors and spirits, as well as celebrating the New Year. The differences lie in the fact that the Songkran festival in Thailand more reflects the values of Buddhist heritage, peace, and equality. This is evident in the reverence for water in Thailand, the strengthening of family relationships, and the emphasis on a well-ordered family structure based on age and religious concepts. Meanwhile, the cultural meaning of Pi Mai Lao includes stronger Buddhist elements, such as the law of karma, the adaptation of virtue, the reward of kindness, and also encompasses a longing for traditional culture.

The author is constrained by limitations in the Thai and Lao languages in this research, resulting in several shortcomings. The author could not conduct in-depth field research in Thai and Laotian communities, delve into the evolutionary processes of these two cultural celebrations under various historical and social conditions, and understand how they gradually became localized. Additionally, research on the development of Songkran in Thailand and Boun Pi Mai in Laos in the context of social modernization is not sufficiently thorough. This will be the focus of the author's future research.

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