

The Tai *lak*: ritual and socio-political function

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The subject of this paper is the lak, which is a central cultural element in Tai societies. Fulfilling social, religious and political functions and consisting of several elements the lak can be specified as a socio-political institution, which is of special importance in the Tai baan-müang systems.

Introduction

There is quite a lot of evidence of the cultural element called *lak*¹ with Tai peoples in literature, but the material is fragmentary and information comes from personal observations, from narratives or rewritten history and seldom from original primary sources. The works of Notton (1926)² and Terwiel (1978) for example, are based on primary sources, but these are exceptional cases. The reason for the extreme difficulty in gaining access to primary sources concerning the ritual and its cosmogonic background might be that it is tabooed to pass on “secret knowledge” to non-entitled or non-predestined persons. However, the historian and the anthropologist are directly confronted with the term *lak* in historical literary sources or in secondary works on history and they cannot neglect this important Tai cultural element.

Many literary sources are dealing with the Tai word *lak müang*. Generally, the term is translated as “city pillar,” but in my opinion this translation is inadequate.³ The *lak müang* is only one sort of *lak*, the other type within this category is the *lak baan* (which belongs to the village). Several authors have given descriptions and definitions of the institution of the *lak müang*.

According to Terwiel, the *lak müang* “was erected in the name of the highest political authority, and up to the present day the religious practices connected with

¹Objectives for transcription used in this paper had been proposed in TAI CULTURE Vol. II no. 1 (1997):6-15.

²Notton has been cited again and again. However, Notton's primary source is not exactly given in the original wording.

³See “The Monument” section of this paper.

the guardian spirit of the *làng myan* (*cáawpháo làng myan*)⁴ are reminiscent of attitudes towards a seat of political power.”⁵

The political importance of the *lak müang* is also mentioned by Taillard.

“Ce système politique, à l’échelle de la seigneurie, repose sur un modèle spatial en nébuleuse organisé autour d’un centre symbolique unique représenté par l’autel du génie tutélaire de la seigneurie (*fi muang*) et par le poteau de la lignée (*lak muang*), génie du sol lié à la famille du seigneur qui exerce le pouvoir.”⁶

Davis states, that the cult of *phii müang* remains primarily agricultural in orientation. He supposes, that the *lak müang*

“perhaps evolved from the trees that once embodied the fertility on the ancient chief’s *muang*.⁷ The village of the chief of the *muang* is the site not only of the tree of the *phii muang* but also of the *lak muang* or *lak suea*, a wooden post which is associated with the incumbent chief and is uprooted and replaced at the installation of a new chief. This post embodies an earth spirit whose domain is identical to that of the *phii muang*, but whose rites are the personal concern of the chief.”⁸

Another aspect - that of the unifying character - is taken into consideration by Udom:

“Like the Village Pillar, the City Pillar is one of the city’s unifying symbols. Together with the Lord of the City or ‘Chao Luang’ (now known by the title of ‘Governor’), the City Pillar is a strong symbol of civic administration.”⁹

Similar information is given by Zhu, when he defines the *zaixin* (*zai* = *tjai* - heart) “as the soul of the community..., the heart of society.”¹⁰

The given descriptions include several aspects of social and political life, and one more interesting fact is mentioned by Naichanth, when speaking of the *Phra Lak Muang* as the defender of laws, “ensuring that the juridical process is carried out justly.”¹¹

⁴The cited author uses the Haas transcription system.

⁵Terwiel 1978:159; see also Mulder 1992:17-18.

⁶Taillard 1992:317.

⁷Davis uses his own transcription system.

⁸Davis 1984:273-274.

⁹Udom 1997:26.

¹⁰Liangwen 1992:16.

¹¹Naichanth 1982, English summary.

From these introductory statements one can deduce that the *lak* is a social institution of special importance, having its own ritual and fulfilling an important socio-political function.

Considering the *lak* in detail one must recognise that it consists of different elements, which reach far behind its visible shape. There is the *lak* as a physical phenomenon, circumscribed by “monument” in this paper; and there is the *lak* as a “performance,” executed by several celebrants and with the participation of the community.¹² Another noticeable element is the ceremonial text, which is recited mainly by the celebrants (“performers”), but partly also by the community (“audience”). Invisible elements organising and structuring the institution are the “genius,” which is believed to inhabit the *lak*, and the “code,” the totality of regulations and norms connected with the genius.

The “Monument”

Before introducing shape and symbolism of the monument known as *lak*, the linguistic background of the notion and its synonyms should be made clear.

Skinner’s idea, that the Sanskrit term Shiva-linga and *lak* should be of the same origin,¹³ is not very convincing, not may be linguistically nor anthropologically.¹⁴ For instance, there is no positive evidence that the term *lak* is of Tai origin.¹⁵ Although it is often translated with “post, pillar” and (at least partially) really does mean this in the Tai languages (especially of the south-western groups), it is exactly understandable and commonly used only in combination with other words¹⁶, such as *lak baan*, *lak müang*, *lak see* (post of the monastery), *lak khaa* (penal post), and *lak mong* (one of the house-pillars) etc. Besides this, the term is often used in word-combinations with philosophic quality such as *lak suut* (summary, syllabus, curriculum), *lak thaan* (basis, foundation, evidence), *lak kaan* (principle), *lak keen* (rules) etc. - expressions which are accepted to be of Sanskrit origin. Udom (1990) gives 18 examples of possible combinations of the term *lak*, which can be reduced to two central meanings: 1) post or pillar describing a

¹²A detailed description overview is given by Sommai Premchit in “The history of Inthakhin Post,” Wat Chedi Luang Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai 1995.

¹³Skinner 1957:130.

¹⁴See also Terwiel 1978:166.

¹⁵According to Sapir (in: Sapir, P.: The Collected Works of Edward Sapir 1994:100-102), the word-stem is a reliable criteria to stamp a word of foreign origin. If a stem has no clear or an ambiguous meaning, it is quite sure that it was borrowed from a foreign language, even if that word stem can no longer be found in the possible original language.

¹⁶Asking native speakers about the meaning of *lak*, one will promptly be re-asked to concretise, what kind of *lak* one wishes to hear about or, in the other case, the term *lak* will be translated into *sao*, which is the unambiguous Tai term for “post” or “pillar.”

material phenomenon and 2) basis or foundation as a word of philosophic quality. It cannot be said which meaning of these is the original one. However, to be understood clearly in an actual context, the word must be combined with other words.

Dealing with *lak müang* or *lak baan*, one should have a clear understanding of *müang* and *baan*. Is is not correct to simply translate *müang* as “city.” The English terms “village” and “city” are traditional Western concepts, but are not fully applicable to the Tai concepts of *baan* and *müang*. Especially the term *müang*, which must be understood within the context of its Tai background; it means much more than only a city. *Müang* is firstly a consolidation of several *baan*, which might be situated in different locations, some distance from each other.¹⁷ Each *baan* owns (common and/or private) land, which as a whole makes the area of the *müang*. According to Srisak the reasons for founding *müang* are agricultural ones; wet rice cultivation using well developed flood and irrigation techniques in a large area (mostly a valley) requires co-operation and administrative co-ordination between several *baan*.¹⁸ The basic character of *müang* traditionally is not urbanity, although the administrative centre, which is the seat of the *chao müang* (the governor of the *müang*) is called *tjai müang* (the heart of the *müang*) or *müang*¹⁹ for short, can become an economic, religious and urban centre too. However, urbanity is not a precondition for a major *baan* to become the administrative centre of the whole *müang*.²⁰ Taillard calls *müang* “seigneuries” and gives the following description of the interrelationships between several *baan* in a *müang*:

Le pouvoir central opère des prélèvements sur les communautés locales - marques de leur dépendance -, en échange de services rendus - signes de la relation de réciprocité -, et d'une liberté accordée dans la gestion de leurs affaires - témoin de l'autonomie dont elles bénéficient à l'échelon local... Il s'agit de la forme la plus archaïque des systèmes politiques thai, celle de populations non bouddhistes parlant des dialectes tay, et installées dans les vallées et petits bassins du Nord de la péninsule. Ces seigneuries qui n'ont pas atteint la dimension d'un royaume se sont maintenus au Vietnam²¹ jusqu'en 1945 où elles ont

¹⁷Srisak 1996:61.

¹⁸ibid.:62-63.

¹⁹The ambigeousity of the term *müang* has caused great confusion in research into the history of the Tai peoples. The term *müang* designates at the same time the whole space and area of a *müang* (as a consolidation of several *baan*, which might be better translated with "country") as well as the administrative centre of that area.

²⁰Müang Baan Soong (a quarter of today's Vang Viang in Central Laos) for example, was and still is, a small village and would not be called a town or city (in the Western context), but it is the major *baan* (or (*tjai*) *müang*) and was the seat of the *chau* of Müang Soong, which occupies a large area along the Soong river. The same applies to a number of Müang in Northern/Northeastern Laos and Vietnam.

²¹The author refers to the Tai *müang* in Northern Vietnam, it has nothing to do with the ethnic Viet people.