



เทศกาลลอยกระทง

ของ

เสริญโกเศศ

LOY KRATHONG

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LOY KRATHONG



The full moon nights of the eleventh and twelfth lunar months, *i.e.* in the later parts of October and November, are the days of *Loy Krathong*. *Loy* is "to float," and *krathong* is a "leaf cup," usually made of banana leaf as one often sees in the market. The leaf cup is used to hold something. *Loy Krathong* is, therefore, the floating of lights in a leaf cup. During October and November, all the rivers and canals in the lowlands are flooded and in some places overflow their banks. The rainy season is now in a sense over. It is the time of rejoicing, for the weather is fair after the rains. The sky becomes bright and clear, without dampness. After the strenuous labour of ploughing and planting rice for the last three months at a stretch from dawn till dusk, for the country-folk, the heavy work is now over. The peasants have only to wait a month or more for the reaping. During this interval, they have nothing much to do but spend a time of comparative leisure with feasts and festivals of which there are many in these two months of October and November. But we will speak here of the *Loy Krathong* only.

If you go into a market just a few days before the full moon of October and November, you will see in some stalls or shops, displayed apart from other things, a number of *krathong* or leaf cups specially made for sale in this season. I will not describe the *krathong*, for a representative number of their kind may be seen now. Some of the *krathong* are not leaf cups at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. Generally, some of them are in the shape of a bird or a boat. They are more of a toy than a *krathong*, and have only made their appearance in recent years. These are confined mainly to the town people. The country folk usually have their own home-made *krathong* for the occasion, and perhaps there may be one or two progressive folk who make them in the shape of a bird or boat for the amusement of their children. Usually in a

krathong, apart from a candle and one or more incense sticks, a small coin, say a five-satang piece, is also put in, and sometimes a mouthful of betel nut and betel leaf for chewing purpose is added. I am being particular in this instance, as the addition of these two small things is not generally observed nowadays. They are clues, if any, of the origin of *Loy Krathong* in far-off days.

In the evening, when the full moon begins to rise in October and November, the people carry one or two *krathong* to the edge of the water. After the candle and incense sticks in the *krathong* are lighted, they let it go gently on the surface of the placid water. A few folk will sometimes raise their hands in worship. They watch the *krathong* as they float sluggishly along the water for sometime until they float far away out of sight. The children, to while away the time, play with water fireworks. The fireworks, besides being a form of amusement, are a part of any celebration, secular or religious. We light fireworks sometimes in the same spirit as we light candles as an act of worship.

The floating *krathong* usually has a short life. As it floats far away from its starting place, the children further down stream will, in most cases, swim out to snatch the *krathong*. If it is a beautiful one there may be a scramble for it. They will perhaps ignore the common ones, but will not forget to snatch up the small coin, if any, in the *krathong*. It is an aesthetic pleasure to see many *krathong* with their flickering candles bobbing gently up and down, borne along the silent and placid waters under the light of a full moon. Of course, I speak of the days when there were no motor boats and outboards to disturb the peaceful waters with their waves and unpleasant sounds.

As can be gathered from the above description, there is nothing in the nature of a ritual and ceremonial act attached to the *Loy Krathong*. You simply light the candle and incense sticks and let it loose on the water. That is all you have to do. But the small coin that is put in, and the lighting of the candle and incense stick, betray a cult of some kind. If you ask the people for an

explanation, the elder ones will tell you that the *Loy Krathong* is an act of remission to the Goddess Mae Khongkha the Mother of Water. Khongkha is the same word as the Indian *Ganga* or *Ganges*; but in Thai language it means water in general. They will further explain that in spite of the Mother's bountiful gift of water to man, he sometimes has polluted her water in various ways, therefore it is only proper to ask her pardon. The explanation, if not plausible, is one which the simple believing folk can explain. But why do it in two consecutive months? Another explanation is that the Lord Buddha printed his foot on the sandy shore of the Nammada River or the Nerbudda River in the Deccan by request of the King of Naga, who wanted to worship the Lord Buddha's footprint when the Lord had gone. This is a religious but apocryphal explanation as to the origin of *Loy Krathong* which is not to be found in the Buddhist scriptures. It is in one way useful to preserve any tradition if a touch of religious explanation be given to it. There is another explanation in the nature of a folk tale of the Buddhist *Jataka* kind, which long story I need not go into, for it will interest folklorists only. The Chiangmai folk have a different explanation for the origin of *Loy Krathong* which is, I think, identical with the Burmese.

I have now given you a description of *Loy Krathong* on its popular side, but will now try to give you another side of the royal *Loy Krathong*. You cannot expect anything much from me, as I witnessed it and only in part some fifty years ago, during H.M. King Chulalongkorn's reign when I was quite a young boy. The royal *Loy Krathong* has now disappeared, even in the later years of that august monarch's reign. As far as I can gather, there was a revival once or twice during the reigns of Their Majesties King Vajiravudh and King Prajadhipok. It was revived in one instance, on the occasion, if I remember rightly, of the late Lord Northcliffe's visit to Thailand. It was a *Loy Krathong* on a minor scale. The *Loy Krathong* on a grand scale was never in fact done, even in King Chulalongkorn's reign. What I know about the royal *Loy Krathong* is from an article written by H.M.

King Chulalongkorn in his invaluable work พระราชพิธี ๑๒ เดือน or "The King's Ceremonies during the Twelve Months of the Year." Dr. Quaritch Wales has quoted copiously from this book in his interesting work *Siamese State Ceremonies*, therefore I will not go fully into the subject. I think Dr. Quaritch Wales has already said something of the royal *Loy Krathong*.

H.M. King Chulalongkorn says in his book that the *Loy Krathong* has nothing to do with any recognised ceremony or rite. It is merely a matter of rejoicing in which all the people take part and is not only for royalty; moreover it is concerned with neither Buddhist nor Brahmin ceremony. His Majesty thought that the *Loy Krathong* had some connection with the floating lanterns (ลอยโคมลงน้ำ) as observed by Thai kings in the north when Sukhothaya was the Capital some six or seven hundred years ago. It was described ornately in a book written by Nang Nophamat, a beautiful and learned lady of the court of King Phra Ruang. The lady was the daughter of a Brahmin family priest attached to the Court. She said that in the twelfth month, November (she said nothing of the eleventh month), the country was flooded, The King and his court went for a picnic on the river to witness the people enjoying themselves during the water festival at night. Nothing is said of the *Loy Krathong* of the people, but it can be taken as a fact that it took place. The *krathong* was most probably in the same shape as that which we see at the present day, for Lady Nophamat told in her book that she had introduced a new kind of *krathong* in the shape of a big lotus flower and many other styles for the king to float in the running stream, no doubt for his enjoyment. She further initiated certain recitations and songs to be sung for the King on the occasion.

As will be seen, the *Loy Krathong* had already by that time no religious or ritual meaning. It was a matter of enjoying oneself in a leisurely and placid manner during the flood period under the light of the full moon in ideal weather. No hint is given as to a small coin being in a *krathong*. The origin of *Loy*

Krathong as Lady Nophamat explains is the worshipping of the Buddha's footprint on the sandy shore of the Nammada River as already described. Now the Chinese have their own *Loy Krathong* too and it is a ritual act. They call the *krathong* "lotus flower lamp," and call the floating "the floating of the lamps," akin to the old Thai word of floating lanterns (ลอยโคม). Is there any connection? I think there is. The Indians have their floating lights, but these vary from one locality to another. They attach no meaning or ritual importance to the act, and in fact in Southern India, it is done merely as a custom and a picnic on the banks of a stream when the water is full. Of course there may be many explanations, some say that they do it to honour their favourite gods or goddesses. That is all I can gather from my Indian friends.

I can remember rather dimly the King's *Loy Krathong* when I was a boy. The event took place on the river in front of the Royal Landing at the Grand Palace. Part of the river in front of the Royal Landing was reserved for the occasion. Two large boats were stationed midstream, one at each end. A long rope was attached to the two boats forming an outer barrier. There were many palace guard-boats patrolling the barrier and both end openings of the water space where the *Loy Krathong* was to take place, in order to prevent unofficial boats from trespassing this area. I obtained this description from a certain friend of mine in after years. At the time I was too young to note anything. I saw a number of miniature royal barges moored alongside the Royal Landing which I was told by my elders were the King's *Krathong*. My attention as a small boy was naturally fixed on these particular boats more than on anything else, hence I cannot remember what other things I had seen. H.M. the King and his court would not arrive on the scene until after 9 o'clock in the evening. I left the place without seeing the actual *Loy Krathong*. Of course, there were crowds of people on the banks waiting to see the King and his court. This was all I saw and all I can remember.

If my memory serves me right, on one occasion when I went in a paddling boat with my elders, I saw a great number of boats going to and fro on the river outside the barrier. It was a boat meet at night time, every boat was free to ply happily without launches and motor boats to disturb the peace. The people in the boats were in good spirits. They sang and played music, and in some cases with recitations and repartees. The children amused themselves with water fireworks of the kind you see now. There were mobile cookshops in boats of every description, and they found ready customers. If preferred, one could take one's own food and enjoy one's repast with one's fellows in midstream in ideal surroundings and amidst merry-marking. I long to witness such a scene again, but it will never come back, for it is of the past, for "Old times are changed, old manners gone," if I may be allowed to quote half-remembered words from Sir Walter Scott's "The Lays of the Last Minstrel."

Now, for my supplementary notes of the royal *Loy Krathong* which I have on good authority from my friend. He says that in the old days the royal *Loy Krathong* was on a grand scale called *krathong yai* or big *krathong*. Some of the princes and ministers of state each made a *krathong*. They were big ones, so big that they could accommodate in each of them a number of artistes playing musical instruments or performing comic stunts and practical jokes. The designs of the *krathong* were various, giant lotus flowers, junks and what-not. Each owner competed with the others. No doubt there was fun and enjoyment but it was too costly to do every year. It was given up and real royal barges illuminated in designs were used as substitutes for the occasion during H.M. King Chulalongkorn's reign. This big *krathong* took place in the full moon of the twelfth month (November), while the *krathong* on a minor scale composed of miniature royal barges took place in the eleventh month (October). The King with his court viewed the display of *Loy Krathong* from a large floating pavilion having many large dug-out boats as pontoons. He dined and stayed there until past midnight, while the royal children amused themselves with water fireworks.

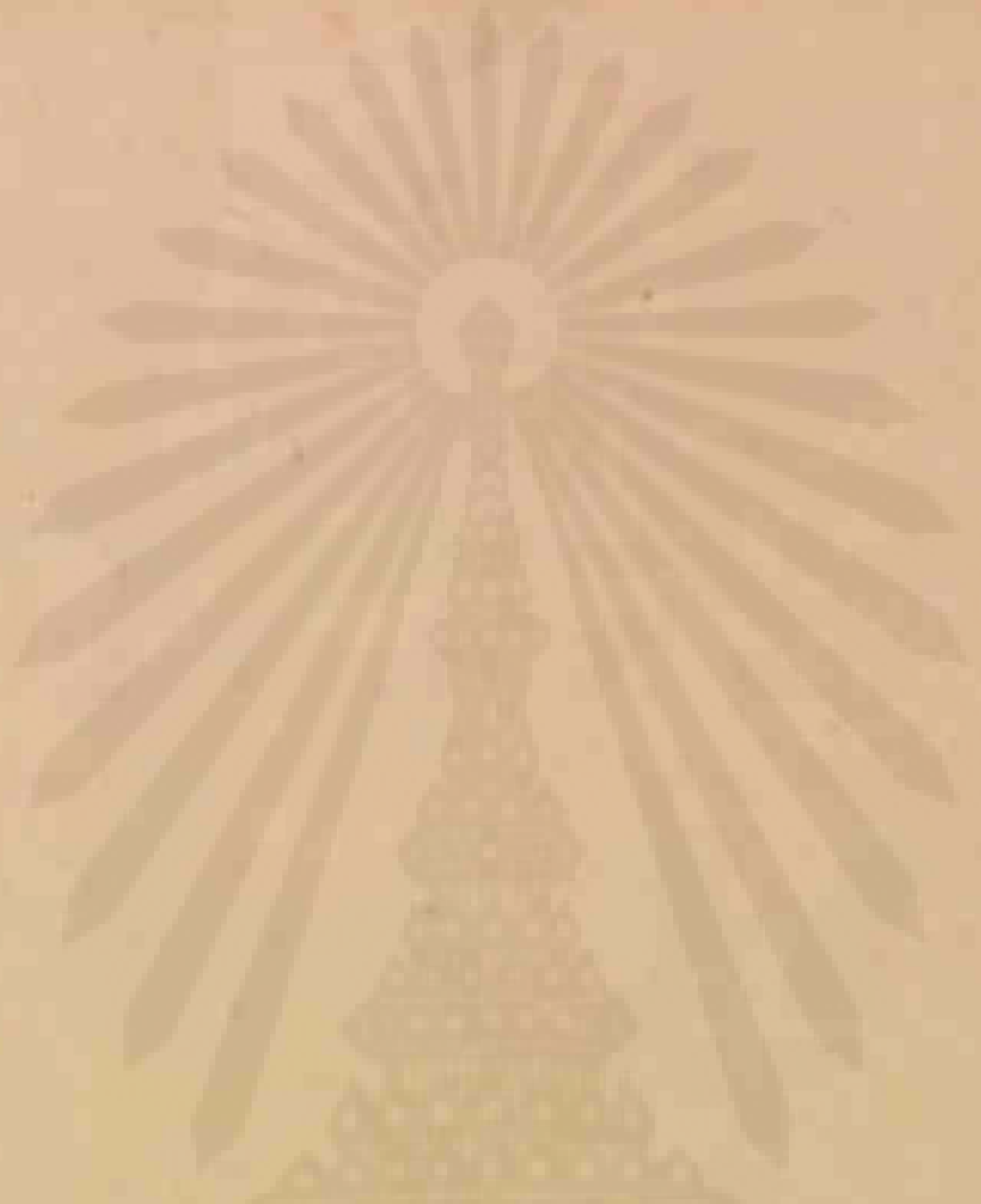
The origin of *Loy Krathong* can be traced. Primarily, it is no doubt a yearly offering to the water spirits or the floating away to the depths of all sins and calamities that may befall you. The people in Chiangmai and in the North-Eastern provinces have one very big *krathong* made and in some places light it with torches. They put in the *krathong* some provisions and clothing. These will be taken by some poor people downstream far away from their starting places, an act which is equal to that of transferring sins to others, using them as scapegoats. The Cambodians, apart from the royal *Loy Krathong* similar to the Bangkok one, have a special day during the autumnal month for a *Loy Krathong*, as an act of filial duty to their departed ancestors. They ask their departed ones to partake of a feast specially prepared for the occasion, which is no doubt an echo of the first-fruit feast of primitive days. After the supposed repast, the ancestors are sent away, in imagination of course, in a boat or *krathong* made of banana stems filled with provisions. This custom is still preserved by the people of Cambodian descent in some localities of the country.

Secondly, the *Loy Krathong* is in a sense a thanksgiving to the Goddess of Water. It is probably confined to agricultural people who rely on the abundance of water as a source of economic life.

Thirdly, the *Loy Krathong* in its later development is a pastime for spending an evening outdoors amid pleasant surroundings near the water, which comes but twice successively in a year. The *Loy Krathong* is to me, therefore, a natural psychological feeling, to let something float away as children often do. It is a mixture of a cult in a certain sense which has now lost its meaning, but which has survived only feebly in form to be added to the third surmise which you see today. That is why we have it in two consecutive months, October and November. I think the former month has something to do with the first and second explanations which subsequently merged into the latter one.

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