

# ***PuYer-YaYer*: Myths and Rituals of Ancestor Spirits with Buddhism in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a study of the dynamics of meaning of the ancestor spirits of Laos in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. Two types of data were analyzed: myths and rituals on *PuYer-YaYer*. It was found that *PuYer-YaYer*'s myths and rituals reflect the complexity and diversity of the religious beliefs in the Lao society. It begins with the folk belief about the royal spirits of the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom or Luang Prabang. Then their status has changed to be the guardian spirits of the city called "*Devata Luang*" which is based on Buddhism. In the past, myths and rituals about *PuYer-YaYer* were widespread only in the city of Luang Prabang. Then they were spread to other regions. Myths, beliefs and rituals of Laos in Luang Prabang reflect that *PuYer-YaYer* are not only the ancestor spirits, but they are also cultural heroes who are very important. They are also the creators of the land of Laos, which relates to a Lao view of the universe. Moreover, the meaning of *PuYer-YaYer* in myths and rituals reflect that citizens of Luang Prabang maintain their cultural identity by defining the meaning of their identity via the identity of "*PuYer-YaYer*" which are worshipped by all the people. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer* is a distinctive way for people in Luang Prabang to co-create self-awareness and a symbol of the social group associated with being Lao in Luang Prabang.

**Keywords:** *PuYer-YaYer*, Myth and Ritual, Ancestor Spirit, Buddhism, Lao PDR

## **Introduction**

The Songkran Festival or New Year celebration has been practiced for a long time. In this festival, people make merit, celebrate and splash water on each other. Songkran Festival in Luang Prabang is distinctive and different from others in the same region since the ancestor spirits 'PuYer-YaYer' from the myths of Luang Prabang also take part in this festival. *PuYer-YaYer* represent the palladium of the city and is the symbol of the ancient civilization of the Lao Kingdom. The image of *PuYer-YaYer*, who are the guardian spirits, is a cultural creation of Lao people in Luang Prabang.

Since Luang Prabang became a world heritage site in 1995, *PuYer-YaYer* in Songkran in Luang Prabang have been recognized regionally and internationally. *PuYer-YaYer* are ancestor spirits who are similar to a "mascot" of the New Year festival in Luang Prabang. The whole city celebrates with water fights and a parade of *PuYer-*

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*YaYer* in order to give blessings to the people and the city. Although Songkran festival is influenced by Brahminism-Hinduism and Buddhism, myths such as ancestor spirits like *PuYer-YaYer* have played an important role in the New Year festivals of *Luang Prabang* up until today.

*PuYer-YaYer* are holy characters who appear in folk tales. However, they never appear in the legend of Songkran. The question is why they are used in the Songkran celebration of Luang Prabang to the point that they have become a distinctive symbol of Songkran in Luang Prabang. The objective of this paper is to study the symbolic meaning of *PuYer-YaYer* in the myths and rituals of Luang Prabang in order to find the rationale behind the link between the ancestor spirits and the religious beliefs and to have a better picture of the complexity of folk Buddhism of Luang Prabang. Myths and rituals are used as the resources of the study.



**Figure 1:** *PuYer-YaYer* in Songkran Festival or New Year in *Luang Prabang* (Left photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan and right photograph: from Patrick Gay. 1997: 48)

### Sources of *PuYer-YaYer* Myths

It was found that *PuYer-YaYer* appear in both the literary tradition and oral tradition that have been documented. Sixteen myths are introduced below.

**Myths 1-5** appear in the book “*Wannakadee Lao*” (Lao literature), researched and edited by Bosangkham Wongdara et al. (1987: 32-40), published by the Ministry of Education, Vientiane, Lao PDR. There are five myths in this book: 1) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s coming to earth 2) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s killing monsters 3) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s cutting *Khrua Khao Kaat* tree (a giant tree) 4) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s taking fire for humans 5) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s building the city.

**Myth 6** appears in the article “*PuYer-YaYer: ancestor legend, the city’s holy spirits and changing contexts in Luang Prabang*” by Damrongpon Inchan (2544-2545: 56). In this article, *PuYer-YaYer* are angels sent from heaven to earth to save humankind by cutting down the giant tree that was covering the earth and ridding it of darkness.

**Myth 7** appears in the article “Religious Structure in Laos” by Charles Archaimbault (in Damrongpon Inchan, 2544-2545: 56). According to this article, *PuYer-YaYer* were thralls of *Khun Borom* when they were in *Thaen* City. They had power to kill demons. The citizens then called them “royal spirits” (superior spirits) and built a tower of royal spirits as a worship place.

**Myth 8** appears in the book “The Legend of temples in Luang Prabang” by Chao Khamman Wongkotrattana (2506, in Theerawat Kaewdaeng, 2545: 6). In this book, *PuYer-YaYer* came down from heaven to cut the giant tree to save humankind and lost their lives as a result. They then became the ancestor spirits of Laos in Luang Prabang.

**Myth 9** appears in the article “Ritual and Social Hierarchy: An Aspect of Traditional Religion in Buddhist Laos” by Frank E. Reynolds (1978: 167-168). According to this book, *PuYer-YaYer* have peculiar faces. They used to live in heaven but were expelled to live on earth. But at that time, the earth was covered with water and there was no land. When they stepped on the water bubbles, the bubbles turned into land. That is how the cities were formed. People worship them as “royal deities”.

**Myth 10** appears in a French book called “Tresor du Laos” or “The Treasure of Laos” edited by Patrick Gay (1997: 48). This publication contains a short description of *PuYer-YaYer*. They were creators of land who planted *Maak Namtao Poong* trees. These trees had human offspring of various races, including Lao.

**Myth 11-13** appear in the journal “*Muong Lao*” in a short article written by Thanongsak Wongsakda (1999: 18). There are three myths: 1) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s being royal deities in the period of King *Faa Ngum* 2) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s being ‘*thaen*’ (angels) in heaven and 3) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s having *Sing Kaew* and *Sing Kham* as their pets.

**Myth 14** appears in the book “*Khruea Khao Kaat*” told by Suban Luanglad (1999: 1-15) which talks about the origin of Laos. The book contains the images of *PuYer-YaYer* as guardian spirits who help Laotians.

**Myth 15** appears in the book called “*Yod Ruang Lao Jak Lao*” (top stories from Laos) in a tale called “*Phuthao Jai Ded*” (courageous old man) told by Kiriboon (2549: 174-176). In this tale, *PuYer-YaYer* has a role to protect humans. Lao also call them by the name “*Pu Mod* and *Ya Ngaam*”.

**Myth 16** appears in the book “*Old Luang Prabang*” by Betty Gosling (1996: 8-19). This book uses the term *Pu No* and *Na No* for *PuYer-YaYer*, who, equipped with shovels, hoes, and axes, demolished the earthly vegetation and any hostile peoples who hindered their progress. When the royal party reached what would later become

Luang Prabang, *PuYer-YaYer* became the future city's *devata luang*, or royal tutelary gods, more powerful by far than the fifteen naga (serpent deities) that had previously protected the area.

Next, the myths about *PuYer-YaYer* were analyzed for their meaning and it was found that they have a clear role in Songkran of Luang Prabang. This customary folklore is relevant to the myths presented above. In interpreting the image of *PuYer-YaYer* that appears in myths and rituals, we will consider three factors: 1) *PuYer-YaYer* and their role in how the Lao view the universe 2) The religious significance of *PuYer-YaYer* in the Songkran festival in Luang Prabang and 3) *PuYer-YaYer* as a symbol and its role in identity building of Lao people in Luang Prabang.

### ***PuYer-YaYer* and Their Role in How the Lao View the Universe**

In the previous section, we presented a synopsis of *PuYer-YaYer* in different myths. These myths are known throughout Laos, especially among Lao people in *Luang Prabang* and its surrounding areas. Although the details may be different, the plot and main features of the characters are very similar.

The role and importance of *PuYer-YaYer* are found to be linked to the Lao way of life in at least two respects. First, the myth of *PuYer-YaYer* describes the building of *Luang Prabang* city at the beginning of time and the root of the Lao dynasty. It portrays *PuYer-YaYer* as the ancestors exhibiting the kindness of the original society. *PuYer-YaYer's* myths make Lao aware of their ethno-identity. They also create religious beliefs. Lao in the past worshipped these two spirits because they were guardians who had power to protect the city. Moreover, they created life, especially human beings. They also created peace and harmony and make the world a place for humankind to live by destroying demons and darkness on earth.

Second, Laotians think that *PuYer-YaYer's* myths are related to Songkran, or New Year, in Luang Prabang. To celebrate, people will wear *PuYer-YaYer's* costume in the parade. Lao consider them sacred beings that have existed for a long time. They bring prosperity and abundance to people and the city. That is why Lao people wear *PuYer-YaYer's* costume in the Songkran parade, which is the celebration for the New Year.

Nonetheless, the link between *PuYer-YaYer* and Songkran only appears a short time ago. It may have happened after the change in regime from constitutional monarchy to Socialist in 1975. Later, two customs have been added, the "*Liang Phii Muang*" (a ball for the city's spirits) tradition and the "*Hae Nang Sang Khan*" (a parade of Miss Sang Khan) tradition. Notice that Songkran was never mentioned in any of the myths about *PuYer-YaYer*. We will talk later about how they have been involved with Songkran.

Having analyzed *PuYer-YaYer's* myths, we found that the main theme is about the conflict between humans and supernatural powers. *PuYer-YaYer* represent the ancestors of humankind and the maker of the land and all beings. They also destroyed

*Khruea Khao Kaat* trees, the giant trees that covered the earth with darkness. Humans suffered from the lack of sunlight. *Phaya Thaen Luang* ordered *PuYer-YaYer* to come down to earth to save humankind. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer* are related to “*thaen*”, angelic beings. They are also symbols of an old belief in “*phii*” (spirits) that has been in the Loatian belief system for the longest time. *Phii* are supernatural beings that can be malevolent or beneficent.

When we consider the relationship between the three characters: *Thaen*, *PuYer* and *YaYer*, we find that they are closely related. *PuYer-YaYer* have the same status as *Thaen*. According to Tai and Lao belief, there are many types of *Thaen*, such as *Thaen Tang*, *Thaen Sii*, *Thaen Luang*, etc. Some of the *PuYer-YaYer*'s myths indicate that “*PuYer-YaYer* are *Thaen*'s who come from heaven.” Some folk tales mention that *PuYer-YaYer* sprang from the power of *Thaen Luang* who lived in heaven. *Thaen Luang* ordered both of them to come down to earth to create lands so that all beings have a place to live. Notice that heaven is the original habitat of *PuYer-YaYer* and *Thaen Luang* who was almighty ordered the two old angels to come to earth to save humankind. Some myths mention that due to their peculiar appearance, they were expelled from heaven and *Thaen Luang* sent them to live among human beings. This shows a close relationship between *Thaen* and *PuYer-YaYer*.

*PuYer* and *YaYer* were a couple who came down to earth together. Their peculiar faces got them expelled from heaven, the land of *Thaen*. When they came on earth, it was full of water and there was no life. So, they stepped on the water bubbles to make land. The act of stepping on the water bubbles to create land is considered a sacred function. We interpret this event as a symbol of the unity between humans and nature. *PuYer-YaYer* represent humans and the water bubbles represent nature. When the two combine, land is created. As such, in the Lao view, their land was created by *PuYer-YaYer*'s steps. So they are regarded as sage men and the ancestors of Laos.

At first glance, the fact that *PuYer-YaYer* stepped all over the water bubbles turning them into land may be viewed as a conflict between humans and nature. However, the hidden meaning of this myth is actually the relationship between humans and nature. It creates a balance so that lives can be created on earth.

Another interesting point is that Lao people view *PuYer-YaYer* as the creators of life. The myths of old couples being creators of life can be found in many ethnic groups along Mekong River. This reveals that they all share one common idea: Tai people, including the Lao, are the offspring of heaven. *PuThaen-YaThaen* or *PuYer-YaYer* or *PuSangkasa- YaSangkasee* come from heaven. They have high status. Humans were created by *Thaen*'s power by magically molding soil and turning it into humans. *Thaen* turns water and land into the earth. Humans and all other beings were created later (Siraporn Na Thalung, 2545: 78-79). All of these myths show that humans believe that they are “heaven's offspring”. In some myths, after the land was created, the earth was covered by a giant tree called *Khruea Khao Kaat*. This giant tree is full of thick leaves that cover the whole place, even *Thaen*'s city. The earth was

darkened and it was cold. This event emphasizes that nature can be dangerous and can destroy humans.

Nonetheless, the myths show that conflict with nature or attempting to destroy nature will lead to death and disaster. This can be seen from the fate of *PuYer-YaYer*, who died after cutting down the *Khruea Khao Kaat* tree because the tree fell down on them. But this is not the end of the story, it is actually the beginning of them becoming the ancestor spirits who guard the city. They become the symbol of the sacred beings of Luang Prabang city. They hold the status of “*Phii Luang*” (royal spirit) who protects the city and the kingdom of Luang Prabang. With an influence from Buddhism, *PuYer-YaYer* are referred to as “*Dewada Luang*” (royal angels). Another distinctive point to be made is that nature destroyed the symbol of the creation of the society. The hidden meaning is that the land’s creation is symbolic of city building in old times. The conflict between humans and nature is merely a scene. The hidden meaning is that nature is the protector of the land. Stepping on the bubbles symbolizes the relief of violence and humanization. The union between the bubbles and *PuYer-YaYer*’s steps represents the union between humans and nature. It signifies human adaptation to the new environment, namely the change from nothingness to creation of land, lives and vitality. This is the Lao way to construct a view of the universe that creates balance in the world.

Besides myths, we find that many rituals are integrated in the Songkran tradition, such as *Song Nam Prabang* (bathing the Buddha statue), *Nang Sang Khan* parade, Bang Fai (rocket fireballs), water fights, worshipping of the city’s spirit, people’s teasing each other or monks splashing water at laymen. On the surface, this seems like chaos. If we look at it symbolically, it represents going back to the old times when there was no social structure and the society was chaotic. Therefore, the chaotic picture represents the pre-creation of the earth. The social structure happened afterwards. Micea Eliade calls this phenomenon the cosmic night (Eliade, 2003: 354). Splashing water is considered a symbol of freshness and abundance. However, it can also reflect the myth of the flood, in which the original state of the earth is covered with water. But the water is chaotic and not suitable for bearing life.



**Figure 2:** *Nang Sang Khan* or *Nang Songkran* in New Year Festival in Luang Prabang (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

Two types of Songkran celebration can be distinguished: religious and worldly. Worldly celebration such as water splashing, powdering, playing in mud and drinking alcohol reflects chaotic and free society. Religious celebration such as the parade of *PuYer-YaYer*, *Nang Sang Khan*, and *Prabang Long Song* reflects the order in the society. The religious celebration combines the ideology of many religions such as Buddhism, *Phii* worship and Brahmanism. Victor Turner suggests that all rituals include a special time. For example, in a carnival or a mature ritual, the chaos in a ritual serves to mock the social structure. A man may be dressing as a woman. The king may become a slave. This special time allows people to ruin the social structure and create other possibilities and the members of the society will realize and revise their rules in their daily life. Turner refers to this phenomenon as “*Communitas*” (Paus. A Erickson, 2001: 130-135).

As mentioned above, it is interesting that the Songkran tradition has its source from Brahmanism and Hinduism and had nothing to do with *PuYer-YaYer*. The question is how these two unrelated concepts coexist in one ritual. There must be a systematic relationship between myths and rituals such as Buddhist rituals, ancestor spirit worshipping, *PuYer-YaYer's* myths, Songkran myths, the *Nang Sang Khan* parade or the *Prabang* parade. They are all founded on the need to create peace, harmony, abundance and happiness in society.

## PuYer-YaYer and Sacred Behaviors in Songkran in Luang Prabang

In this section, we attempt to show the link between rituals and myths. *PuYer-YaYer* is symbolic of the Songkran festival in Luang Prabang. This shows that *PuYer-YaYer* are the most important guardian spirits. Another name for *PuYer-YaYer* is “*Dewada Luang*” (royal angels), which may be influenced by Buddhism. “*Songkran*” itself does not involve *PuYer-YaYer* because it is not associated with beliefs in Buddhism or Brahmanism-Hinduism. However, after having participated in this event, we found that *PuYer-YaYer* played an important role in the festival. We can even say they are the main characters of the event while *Nang Sang Khan* or *Nang Songkran* is the protagonist. This reveals the association between three systems of beliefs: Brahmanism, Buddhism and *Phii* (folk belief). Next, abundance and city building will be shown to be linked to the Songkran festival.

Another distinctive ritual in Songkran Festival in *Luang Prabang* which shows that *PuYer-YaYer* follows Buddhism is the fact that *PuYer-YaYer* splash water onto “*Prabang*”. This symbolizes that Buddhism has the power to change the folk belief, which is based on worshipping ancestor spirits. Villagers believe that splashing water on “*Prabang*” will bring abundance and prosperity. Therefore, having *PuYer-YaYer* splash water on “*Prabang*” changes their image from the ancestor spirits to the guardian spirits who follow Buddhism. Lao still worship *PuYer-YaYer* as they are deities and guardian spirits of the city of *Luang Prabang*. Having participated in the *Songkran* festival in *Luang Prabang*, we have noticed that Lao splash water onto *PuYer-YaYer* with respect. The elderly would pour water onto their feet and gently rub them. They would then rub their head or their grandchildren’s head. Sometimes, they would take hair fallen from *PuYer-YaYer*, made of hemp, to wrap around the children’s wrists. They believe that *PuYer-YaYer*’s hair on their body is sacred and can protect them from misfortune and danger.

Three things are found to be religious symbols in Songkran festival in Luang Prabang. First, *Nang Sangkhan* represents Brahmanism-Hinduism. *Prabang* represents Buddhism and *PuYer-YaYer* represent folk belief on ancestor spirits. Their presence in one place is complementary. They represent unity in the society in order to bring prosperity and abundance to the city. It is also unites the representative of each belief to make an aggregation and creates unity among the people.

Another role of *PuYer-YaYer* is the role of mediator between human and supernatural power. According to certain myths, *PuYer-YaYer* come from heaven. However, some myths say that they were humans living on earth. The kinship terms “*Pu*” (grandfather) and “*Ya*” (grandmother) also indicate that they are closely related to humans. After they became Buddhist, people referred to them as “*Devata Luang*” (royal angels). The original terms “*Phii Luang*” (royal spirits) have become obsolete from the society. Moreover, *PuYer-YaYer* are important in Songkran Festival in that there is a parade that goes around the city with them being the main theme. They always dance with their adoptive children “*Sing Kaew*” and “*Sing Kham*” while walking in the parade.

The dance of *PuYer-YaYer* and *Sing Kaew* and *Sing Kham* is another cultural event. The dance and movement is a form of ritual, celebration and entertainment. It shows ethno-identity at the same time (Levinson and Ember, 1996: 309-312). Dancing is a code and a sign of *PuYer-YaYer's* importance and their holy status. According to myths, they can communicate with *Thaen* who live in heaven. Dancing and movement symbolize pleading to the Holy Spirit or *Thaen Luang* to give blessings and abundance to the *Luang Prabang* community. Another symbolism of *PuYer-YaYer's* dancing is to remind people of the myth about them turning water into land by stepping on water bubbles. The ritual dance reminds people of how the earth and land were created.

Frank E. Reynolds (1978: 167-168) proposes that *PuYer-YaYer's* dance not only depicts natural phenomena or land creation but also decorates the land and turns it to a kingdom. This action creates a system and order in the universe. This shows that this couple not only assists humans but they also assist holy creatures of later times because they are the ones who turn nothingness into lands. They are thus the first beings on earth. Notice that in Songkran Festival, *PuYer-YaYer's* dance takes place in the temple. That means that they create lands for religious places in Buddhism too.



**Figure 3:** The tower of *PuYer-YaYer* or “The tower of royal angels” *Wat Aaham, Luang Prabang*, Lao PDR. (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

Moreover, *PuYer-YaYer's* shrine, known as “*Hor Devata Luang*” (the tower of royal angels), is also located in the temple (*Wat Aaham*). This shows that there is a compromise to install a shrine in a temple by calling it a tower instead of a shrine. It is interesting that the spirits have their place in a temple. Their status has changed to be more complicated. They are the guardian of the temple, the guardian of the city, who have the power over everything in the city, and royal angels. In an important ritual such as Songkran, *PuYer-YaYer* are the first people to pour water onto “*Prabang*”. This reflects their social status and power. Their role has been transformed to be influential in Buddhism too.

The relationship between *PuYer-YaYer* and Songkran festival can be seen in many other details which can be directly or indirectly associated. However, they are

based on the merge between different religions. To be more specific, we will now talk about the legend of Nang Songkran, which is based on Brahmanism-Hinduism. In the legend, a rich man was defamed because he was childless, so he prayed for a child. God Indra granted his wish and his wife became pregnant. Their son was named

“*Dharmabala Kumara*”. The son grew up to be skillful in many things. So, Brahma came down to earth to test his knowledge. *Dharmabala Kumara* could understand the bird language so he overheard the solution to the problem that Brahma asked. *Dharmabala Kumara* won the bet so Brahma had to cut off his own head as a punishment. However, his head was so powerful that it could destroy the earth but it could not be destroyed itself. Therefore, his seven daughters must keep his head up on *Krailas* Mountain. Each year, they rotate to be the one to bring their father’s head down to walk around *Meru* Mountain and take it back to heaven. So the daughter who takes the head in each year is called “*Nang Sang Khan*” or “*Nang Song Kran*” (Office of Culture Committee, 2533: 9-10).

When we compare the legend of *Nang Songkran* to the myth about *PuYer-YaYer*, we will see a similar paradigm. In the legend of *Nang Songkran*, the head of Brahma must be carried so that it does not destroy the earth. If it touches the ground, the earth will be destroyed by fire. If it touches the air, there will be drought. If it touches the ocean, the ocean will dry up. The purpose of Songkran Festival is to bring the head of Brahma to be proceeded in a clockwise parade in the *Ubosot* of Chiang Thong temple. The event’s purpose is to bring peace and abundance to the earth. It is also held in a Buddhist temple, which shows the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism-Hinduism. Likewise, the parade of *PuYer-YaYer* is a ceremony to satisfy the guardian spirits. There are also worshipping rituals for *PuYer-YaYer* inside the temple. At the same time, “*Prabang*”, which is the palladium of the city, is also part of this ritual.

The legend of *Prabang* is as follows. *Phra Chulanaga* of Lanka city was thinking of building a Buddha image in the Dispelling Fear mudra. People in the city also raised money for the project. This Buddha image is called “*Prabang*”. *Phra Chulanaga* installed *Phra That* (relics of The Lord Buddha) inside the Buddha image. Since then, *Prabang* has shown all kinds of magic. Later, the ruler of *Intapat Nakorn* requested to bring *Prabang* from Lanka to be placed in *Intapat Nakorn*. After many wars, *Prabang* was enshrined in Bangkok. After that, the king of Laos asked to have it back to be enshrined in Luang Prabang (see more details in the chronicle 4, 2507: 315-369). *Prabang* represents Buddhism and also the Luang Prabang community. It is also related to the abundance and prosperity of the city. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer*, *Nang*



**Figure 4:** *Nang Sang Khan* is carrying the head of Brahma in Songkran Festival in Luang Prabang. (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

*Sang Khan* and *Prabang* all belong to the same paradigm, which is about the guardian spirit protecting the city. Although these symbols come from different beliefs, they are well accepted and simultaneously worshipped among the Lao people. This is an interesting way to show the relationship between humans and supernatural power.

### **PuYer-YaYer'S Myths: Buddhism and the Identity of Luang Prabang Laos**

There are two main groups of *PuYer-YaYer's* myths. One depicts *PuYer-YaYer* as the creator of the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom. The other depicts *PuYer-YaYer* as the ancient guardian spirits. Their role is to protect and safeguard the citizens of Laos. The image of *PuYer-YaYer* traveling from heaven, or *Muang Thaen*, symbolizes a king of Laos from the old time, which is the time where the city was built to become the *Lan Xang* Kingdom. After *PuYer-YaYer*, they have *Khun Borom*, who was the first king of Laos. *PuYer-YaYer* are considered cultural heroes who are respected and worshipped in Lao society until today. *PuYer-YaYer* are adoptive parents of *Khun Borom* when they were in heaven. *Khun Borom* later became the famous ruler of Laos or "*Chao Mahachiwitkhong Lao*" (the king of Laos). He is also the founder of the Lao nation. This is an attempt to transfer the power of the characters to the actual city of Luang Prabang and the nation of Laos. *PuYer-YaYer* are sacred beings who laid the foundation of the Lao civilization and the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom of Luang Prabang, which eventually became the nation of Laos.

After *PuYer-YaYer* created lands, they passed away and people elevated their status to royal angels. *Khun Borom* who was their adoptive son became the ruler of Laos and founded the Lao dynasty (Frank E. Reynolds, 1978: 167-168). It is believed that the successive generations of the *Lao Lan Xang* Dynasty such as King Fa Ngum, King *Chaiyachetthathiraja* or King *SaamSaen Tai* all descended from *PuYer-YaYer*, the great ancestor spirits who came from heaven or *Muang Thaen*.

Luang Prabang city was created by *PuYer-YaYer* according to the myths so they were the creator of the Lao Kingdom. They also destroyed the giant tree which covered the earth making it unlivable for humans. *PuYer-YaYer* realized that it was their responsibility to protect human beings so they fought against misfortune to protect the citizens of Luang Prabang. After they cut down the giant tree and made room for the sun to shine upon the earth, they were crushed by the tree itself. They sacrificed their life even though they knew they would die from doing so. However, that was just the beginning of the story of how they became royal angels, almighty spirits of the city, and the palladium of Luang Prabang. *PuYer-YaYer* is a symbol of being a citizen of Luang Prabang, which is related to being a citizen of heaven. The word "*Lao Muang Luang*" means Lao people who live in Luang Prabang, the first capital city of the *Lan Xang* Kingdom. Lao people in other regions refer to those from Luang Prabang as "*Lao Muang Luang*". It is also the self-identifying term for Lao from Luang Prabang. The word "*Khon Muang Luang*" (a person from Luang city) is related to "*Phii Luang*" (royal spirits) and "*Devata Luang*" (royal angels) which means *PuYer-*

*YaYer*. So their self-identification implies that they are descendants of *PuYer-YaYer*, who are the royal spirits of this old capital city.

It has been suggested that places are social inventions. Places originate from imagination and do not by themselves exist naturally (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1991: 685). This idea reveals that language has an important role in giving meaning to a place. Language makes an overlooked object apparent or known. The word “*Luang*” or “*Luang Prabang*” was made specific only for the people in this region in order to mark their identity as the Lao of *Luang* city.

## Conclusion

*PuYer-YaYer*'s myths are where the word “*Muang Luang*” (capital city) is derived. It is the name of an ancient city. The definition of “*Luang*” was given through the myths of *PuYer-YaYer*. They are “*thaen*” (angels) traveling from heaven. People call them “*Phii Luang*” (angelic spirits). By calling the city “*Muang Luang*”, it reminds people that the city was made by “*Phii Luang*” and is the city of *Phii Luang* as well. Therefore, the word “*Muang Luang*” means the city of angelic spirits, or *PuYer-YaYer*.

It is said that King *Faa Ngum* respectfully invited *Prabang* from the Khmer nation to be installed in the city of *Luang Prabang*. Later, the city was renamed to “*Muang Luang Prabang*”. This shows that the word “*Luang*” was integrated with the word “*Prabang*”. The word “*Luang Prabang*” reflects the meaning of spirits that are paired with Buddha image. *Luang* is linked to *PuYer-YaYer* and *Prabang* represents Buddhism. The name of the city shows a trace of mixed beliefs in the same place. Buddhism is the mainstream of the society. When people hear the word “*Luang Prabang*”, they think of a city of the Buddha image “*Prabang*” even though local people would perceive it as a city of *PuYer-YaYer*, which is the folk belief hidden in it.

The study reflects the ideology of folk beliefs about ancestor spirits, angelic spirits or *Phii thaen*, mixed with Buddhist concepts, which is the mainstream religion. This shows that there is a compromise and cultural transformation where the outside culture coexists with the inside culture. This is a cultural mechanism to maintain the cultural characteristics of the Lao in *Luang Prabang*.

In conclusion, the myths and rituals of *PuYer-YaYer* function as the space for expression of imagination. It has been recited among Lao for the longest time. These myths are not merely fables. They are in fact the legend of the palladium of a city since the beginning of the city or *Lan Xang* Kingdom. Therefore, myths and rituals about ancestor spirits are confirmation of the holiness of the area, of the city of *Luang Prabang*, which is the physical space represented by the characters of *PuYer-YaYer* who are the guardian angels. They are important in that they make *Luang Prabang* a spiritual space influential in creating an abundance for the people and the community. Myths, beliefs and rituals surrounding *PuYer-YaYer* indicate that they are important in Lao society. Meaning transfer or invention is still a phenomenon and expression of the existence of myth in the contemporary culture.

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