

# Learning the Greatness of Mother Nature Festival Tourism: A Case of Loy Krathong Water Festival in Thailand

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**Abstract.** In Thailand most of settlements are along the banks of rivers and canals that constitute a unique cultural heritage and national identities. This country is the blessing of the river which is called in Thai “Mae Nam” or Mother Water. Thailand has many symbols representing water, whether in ritual, literature, dancing or folk art. Learning the greatness and the significance of water resource as Mother Nature could be derived by tourists through the festivals, especially, the Loy Krathong, a water festival. To understand that greatness, tourists need to realize the value of Loy Krathong festival. In all, the value of the festival affects the family, the community, the society and the world.

## 1 Introduction

Thailand is located in the northern tropical zone between latitudes 21 and 5 at the center of the Indochina Peninsula. It has an area of approximately 514,000 square kilometers. The geographical outline of the country may be compared to an axe with the Malay Peninsula as the handle. The maximum distance from north to south is about 1,648 kilometers, and that from east to west is 806 kilometers. It has about 740 kilometers of coastline on the western side of the Peninsula. The country has common frontiers with LPD (Lao People's Democratic Republic) to the North and the East, with Myanmar to the North and the West, and with Kamphuchea (Kingdom of Cambodia) to the South and the East. The peninsula of Thailand is bounded to the South by Malaysia and partly to the West above latitude 10 by Myanmar

The economic development of Thailand has been guided by five-year plans since 1961. The government has attempted to create necessary conditions for the private sector to participate in the economic development and growth. The economic growth since 1960 has been considered high. The overall average growth rate is estimated to be 5.5 percent.

The major revenue of this derived from agriculture. The economy is based on agriculture and its main export is rice. However, among the sectors of production, agriculture has shared the smallest share in the increased gross national product. Sectors outside agriculture have become the important revenue generators, especially manufacturing utilities, and services. Bangkok, the primate city, dominates all other urban areas of the country and exerts a major influence on the national economy. With a population of some 9 million in 2000, the Bangkok Metropolitan accounts for 45 percent of Thailand's urban population and 16 percent of the total population.

The settlements and towns along the river banks, river islands and canals constitute a unique cultural heritage and national identities of Thailand. This country is the blessing of the river which is called in Thai “Mae Nam” or Mother Water”. Since “water” has generated Thai people's way of

living, it is sometimes regarded as the mother of nature. No other region in the world possesses as many water symbols as East Asia and Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand. Whether it is ritual, literature, dancing, folk art, painting, sculpture, architecture or town planning, a host of aquatic attributes underlies them all. Especially, the water ones. A book by Steve Van Beeks (1995, p. 94) on *The Chao Phya River in Transition* informed that:

Of the four elements which comprise the Thai universe—earth, air, fire, and water—water is pre-eminent. As is apparent even in a cursory study of Thai society, water permeates every aspect of Thai life, shaping perceptions, values, and ultimately, culture.

Water festivals in this country reflect Thai way of living and they become very popular festival tourism. At present this branch of tourism is an ever growing that focuses on travel of local and oversea tourists for expectation of experiencing and enjoying cultural festivals. Amongst the water festivals in Thailand, Loy Krathong Floating is one of the most popular tourism festival.

## **2 Objectives**

The main objective of this research is to delineate the ways tourists learn and understand the greatness and the significance of water resource through festival tourism by taking Loy Krathong, a water festival as a case. The other objective is the importance of Loy Krathong Festival in terms of its value, as one of the study result.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Techniques**

#### *3.1.1 Documentary reviews*

The documentary reviews were done to get information about tourism water based resources especially the tourism attractions carried out through cultural festivals. Loy Krathong festivals performed in different regions of the country are investigated. The information was obtained from many resources, such as literature, the Internet, and other media.

#### *3.1.2 Direct Observation*

The researcher and her assistants interacted with tourists and the locals, and familiarize themselves with all festival activities during the process of Krathong floating. For this, the researcher team could capture the joyful and pleasant atmosphere that attracted tourists.

#### *3.1.3 Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was designed to explore the perception of both the locals and tourists in terms of their recommendations on the festival management.

#### *3.1.4 In-Depth Interview*

An in-depth interview was conducted with festival management organizations and tourists who were encouraged to express their opinion on how they learned about or understood the meaning and the significance of water resource through Krathong Floating.

### 3.2 Analysis

The data were preliminary analyzed during the direct observation fieldwork and confirmed with the information derived from the interviews. Then it is the discussed and interpreted in terms of the research objectives.

## 4 Results of the Study

### 4.1 Loy Krathong as Cultural Tourism Festival

Loy Krathong Festival is one of Thailand's festivals performed on the full moon of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month, a date which usually falls in November. "**Loy**" means "to float" and a "**Krathong**" is a handmade small bowl traditionally made from banana leaves and a section of banana tree trunk. The "bowl" is decorated with folded (origami) banana leaves, flowers, candles and incense sticks. During the Loy Krathong night, the moon shines brightly, the river looks calm. It is a scenic beauty with Krathongs floating on the river. Fireworks are lighted as a part of celebration and the act of worship.

The other water festivals celebrated in Thailand are the "**Songkarn**" and "**Yone Bua**" or "**Lotus Throwing**" Festivals. Songkarn is Thai 's traditional New Year celebrated during 13-15 April of every year. The significance of Songkran is water that regarded as the symbol of the purging of all ills, misfortune and evil and a fresh start of the New Year. It is the great opportunity for merit making and a time to reunite with family members or the Family Day.

Yone Bua or Lotus Throwing Festival is celebrated at the end of the Buddhist lent in Bangpli Community. On that day, thousands of local people line the banks of the canal to throw lotus flowers onto a boat that is carrying a replica of the famous Buddha Image to the Temple.

However, among the water festivals, Loy Krathong is most regarded as the festival that aimed to give respect and gratitude to the Goddess of water.



**Figure 1.** Loy Krathong Festival

### 4.2 The History of Loy Krathong Festival

(1) It is believed that Loy Krathong (or in the past, called "Chong Pa Rieng") is a Brahman festival to worship gods (Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma). When Thai people adopted Buddhism, they combined the

Brahman ceremonies with the Thai way of living. The Thai adapted the ceremony to honor Lord Buddha. While the Indian float a lantern to worship Lord Buddha's foot print on the river banks.

(2) Floating krathong along the river was initiated 700 hundred years ago by Nang Noppamas, the most favorite concubine of a Sukhothai king. She made krathong in a lotus shape. The king of Sukhothai floated it along the river. According to Sri Chula Luck treatise, Phra Ruang (Sukhothai king) said that from now on, on the full moon night of the twelfth lunar month, kings of Siam had to make a floating lotus-shaped lantern to worship the Lord Buddha's foot print on Nammathanati River.

(3) Every full moon of the twelfth lunar month, people carry Krathong to the bank of the canal or river close to their homes. The water is brimful from the last rainfall. They lay down Krathong in the canal or river and watch them float along the water for some time until they float far and far away out of sight. It is a joyful feeling to see many Krathongs with flowers and candle lights float gently under the light of the full moon. Fireworks are lighted as a part of celebration and the act of worship.

### **4.3 Loy Krathong at Present**

Nowadays, Thai people still preserve this tradition; on the full moon of the twelfth, they prepare natural materials to make krathong. For example, they use banana trunk and lotus to make beautiful krathong then stick a candle, incense sticks, and flowers in krathong. They always ask for good luck and forgiveness from Pra Mae Khongkha. At temples and tourist attractions, they hold a krathong contest and Noppamas beauty pageant contest. There are many entertainment shows at night. Moreover, they light cautiously fireworks. The natural materials, used for making krathong, could be easily decomposed.

## **5 Discussions on Learning through Loy Krathong Festival**

### **5.1 The Roles of Water and Reasons for Khathong Floating**

What tourists learn from water festivals of Thai people?

To answer this we have to realize the importance of water resource on Thai people's way of living. The Thai know the value of "River" and "Klong (canal)". They regard water as Mother or Goddess. The roles of water are as follows: (Hidenobu Jinnai, 2004, p. 47)

1. Rivers and canals are the fertility generator enriching and nourishing the agricultural land surrounding the settlement from the past until now.
2. River and canals are the efficient transport facilitators, providing the links or the accessibility to the communities, to the other countries and to the world.
3. Water is the facility provider of (water usage) settlements.
4. River and canals, also the water basin are the places for human livelihood. They can be sites for housing, working, recreation and so on.
5. Water is the cradle of culture and civilization. The rivers in Thailand have formed and delivered the cultural heritage to Thai people for generations. The cultural heritage is valued through architecture, art, the way of living, the way of thinking, activities and the identity of people.
6. It is a natural resource for the economic development regarding the nation's tourism attracted by natural and cultural environment involving water.

Thus, water resource is are source for the sustainability of Thai People's livelihood. Since the water resource is very significant for Thai people, they celebrate Loy Krathong festival to

1. worship Lord Buddha.

2. give respect and gratitude to the Goddess of Water.
3. thank the rivers for giving all advantages to mankind.
4. ask for forgiveness from the Goddess of Water in case that they pollute the water.
5. ask for the blessing from the Goddess of Water or from the Mother Water.
6. pay respect to their ancestors and make good wishes for distant relatives and friends.
7. enjoy themselves and set an example for their young generation so that they will understand
8. how to preserve the water resource and how to maintain a sustainable development.
9. wish for good things to come true.

## **5.2 Tourists' learning about and perception of the greatness of Mother Nature through Loy Krathong Festival**

Up to now, the Thai livelihood has depended largely on nature that has nourished their life, particularly, Mae Nam (river). The Thai feel gratitude to the river so on a special occasion, they would like to ask the goddess of river for forgiveness and blessing and to pay gratitude to her (by cleaning the river during Loy Krathong Festival). These are the main purposes of this festival. Attracting tourists and enjoyment are considered minor. According to the questionnaire and the interviews, most of tourists appreciated the celebration but they accepted that they might not completely understand the value of Loy Krathong. Nevertheless, it was found that the tourists agreed that this festival was worth carrying on. It should be done by

1. the family because it is a family reunion. Each member would like to express gratitude to the Goddess of Water so they are willing to help make krathong.
2. the community because it promotes harmony among community members.
3. the society because it promotes compassion among those in the society and the environment. Those in the society will help clean the rivers and other water sources.
4. the religious institutions because on Loy Krathong day the Thai will go to the temple to make merit and donate some money for religious activities held by the monks and for maintaining religious buildings. This is a way to cherish religious activities and carry on an age-old cultural activity.

However, the realization of the above mentioned values depends on two conditions. The first one is transformation of this celebration into activities and the second one is "the tourists" themselves. As for the first condition, the community members have to be willing to promote this celebration as a tourist activity and widely publicize the true values of the celebration to the public. The other condition is the tourists. They earnestly would like to learn more about this celebration so that they can have an insight into Thai culture in addition to enjoying themselves. This can be another benefit of visiting Thailand.

## **6 Conclusion**

The celebration of Loy Krathong at present remains a well-preserved cultural activity. The Thai do not celebrate it only at night. Its importance is realized through many activities from dawn till dusk.

In fact, Thai people feel gratitude to Mother Water but Loy Krathong might be an occasion to express this. They clean the rivers and canals either before or after the festival. They celebrate this festival in the morning by going to make merit at the temple. They float Krathong and make a good wish for themselves, others and the environment. In all, the values of the festival are realized in the family, the community, the society and the world. Finally, if everyone, especially tourists do understand the intrinsic value of Loy Krathong festival it is the real achievement of festival tourism.

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