

Each year the old community of Dansai in Loei province holds the Phi Ta Khon festival. (Loei province is in the northeastern region of Thailand known as Isan.) The local people are very proud of this unique and colorful traditional merit making ceremony which has been passed on from generation to generation for centuries. This festival reflects the local Isan belief in ghosts and spirits. Held once a year, it is part of Dan Sai's grand Boon Luang festival.

The Boon Luang festival is really two festivals combined into one. The two festivals are the Boon Phra Wate festival and the Boon Bung Fai also known as the Bamboo Rocket festival. Merit-making is central to the Boon Phra Wate ceremony with villagers congregating at the temple to listen to a total of 13 Buddhist sermons. It is believed that by participating in Boon Phra Wate, the villagers will be brought closer to Lord Sri-Araya – the future Buddha. The Boon Bung Fai ritual is performed to honor the guardian spirits of the village and to ask for sufficient rain to arrive in time for the coming farming season.

The Phi Ta Khon is a re-enactment of the tale describing Lord Buddha's last great incarnation before attaining Enlightenment. According to Buddhist accounts, Prince Vessandara who was the Buddha's penultimate incarnation returned to his village after many years in exile. It was such a joyous occasion that the village spirits came forth to join the welcoming parade. Phi Ta Khon is this very colorful and vibrant procession re-enacted by Dan Sai residents dressed up as "spirits" wearing costumes made from colorful strips of cloth

sewn together and a mask. The mask is made of a special container used to cook sticky rice, a sheath from a coconut palm frond, and wood.

The lively Phi Ta Khon procession also includes depictions of Dan Sai life many, many years ago when the village was a farming community. There are villagers wearing water buffalo costumes to recognize the water buffalo's importance to the farmer in plowing the rice fields and pulling heavy loads. Included also are villagers dressed as the farmers dressed in those days carrying fishing poles or other equipment used to catch fish to represent an important source of food from the Mun River. Some of these farmers are carrying bamboo trays of herbs to represent importance of herbs in treating any illnesses.

The date for the Boon Luang festival may change from year to year. The date is determined by **Jao Saen-muang** a spirit who is regarded as the protector of Dan Sai. Each year **Jao-por Guan** the village spirit leader and male medium along with **Jao-mae Nang Tiam** a female medium, the **Saen** a group of male mediums, and the **Nang Taeng** a group of four female servants hold a special ceremony to learn from the spirit **Jao Saen-muang** when the Boon Luang festival should be held that year.

The first day of Boon Luang is known as Wan Home day. Its purpose is to gather the spirits. Activities begin between 03:00 and 04:00 a.m. before dawn. Villagers assemble at the Phon-chai Temple and then head for the Mun River

led by members of the Saen. There, before the sun rises, an invocation ritual is performed calling upon a revered spirit known as Phra Upakud who is symbolized by white marble.

According to local legend, Phra Upakud was a monk with supernatural powers. Having reached the highest level of meditation, he attained eternal life and was endowed with the power to assume any physical or spiritual form he chose. He opted to transform himself into white marble and to live in complete solitude in a peaceful environment in the waters of the Mun River in Dan Sai.

With these supernatural powers, the villagers believe that only Phra Upakud is able to protect the village from evil spirits. During the invocation ritual, white pebbles symbolic of Phra Upakud are collected from the river bed, consecrated by the leader of the Saen, and then taken back to Pon-chai Temple where sacred rituals are performed in Phra Upakud's honor and where later the monks are fed special ceremonial food.

A few hours later that morning the local villagers assemble to summon additional spirits at the home of Jao-por Guan which doubles as the most important spirit shrine in Dan Sai. All present participate in a *bai sri* ceremony which involve incantations, lighting of candles, and then the tying of sacred threads on the arms of Jao-por Guan and Jao-mae Nang Tiam. Members of the Saen and the Nang Taeng tie a single loop of sacred thread around one wrist of everyone present.

At the end of the tying of strings ceremony, the Saen men take down bundles of special costuming kept on a high altar, put the costumes on and gather in front of the house. Joining the Saen are two village men who are each wearing a tall bamboo frame covered with cloth and topped with a giant head. One figure is obviously male and the other obviously female. These figures are the *phi ta khon yai* (*big Phra Wate spirits*). They are fertility symbols to the Dan Sai villagers. They symbolize abundance in having children, large crop yields, lush and green surroundings, and success in their businesses. The *Yai* are surrounded by regular *phi ta khon* figures as well as villagers and others as they lead a procession from Jao-por Guan's house back to the Pon-chai Temple where they circle the temple three times.

Later, more local villagers dressed in Phi Ta Khon costumes as well as anyone else who want to join in the celebration gather at a designated location. From there they form a parade cheerfully dancing around the village. The participants are celebrating Boon Luang but this procession is a community organized event and not part of the religious activities.

In the afternoon of the next day, the religious ceremonies continue with the Pra Wate worship procession led by the Saen and some villagers carrying offerings and ceremonial objects. Following them are four monks accompanying a statue of Lord Buddha placed on a table in a vehicle. Jao-por Guan follows sitting on a rocket on a colorfully decorated float accompanied by Jao-mae Nang Tiam and the Nang Taeng. Behind them are the Phi Ta Khon

figures re-enacting Prince Vessandara's return to his village by dancing along the way creating joy and excitement. When they reach the Pon-chai Temple, they circle the temple three times.

Jao-por Guan, Jao-mae Nang Tiam, and their attendants enter the temple to perform a ceremony. After they emerge from the ceremony the bamboo rockets are launched into the sky in the hope of bringing rain. Soon after the launch a group of villagers take the *phi ta khon yai* costumes to the Mun River and throw the costumes into the river. Dan Sai villagers believe this act rids the village of any evil spirits that may have come to Dan Sai. This event marks the end of the Phi Ta Khon, but Boon Luang continues.

In the early evening Buddhist sermons are begun and continue well into the next morning. Those who want to receive merit will listen throughout the night.

In the early morning of the third day (the final ceremonial day), the rest of the villagers return to the temple to listen to Buddhist sermons for one last time. This marks the close of Dan Sai's most important festival of the year.