LAK BAN AND LAK MUANG:THE IDEOLOGY OF SETTLEMENT LAND-SCAPE IN TRADITIONAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

This paper describes the identifying role ritual architecture plays in the construction of settlement landscapes in northern mainland Southeast Asia. Integrating ethnographic and art historical data, it develops a framework for understanding lak ban and lak muang in terms of their socio-historical development, spatial organisation, ritual observances, designs, and meanings.

> *Landscape cannot be fully understood without reference to a worldview which integrates place and space in the production of meaning .*
> (Snead & Preucel 1999,170).

Introduction

Settlement implies the accumulations of ritual, religious, and domestic architecture. In many traditional societies of northern mainland Southeast Asia, lak ban (the village post) and lak muang (the city/town pillar) are considered key architectonic elements on which the settlement spaces are organised. Playing a significant role in a community's ceremonial life, they are established at the centre of the domains and ritually preserved. The cult of lak ban and lak muang represents ancient forms of beliefs, which have probably been practised since pre-historic times. As the terms suggest, the spatial phenomena within which these cult objects are incorporated embrace different scales of settlement forms: the village (ban) and the city (muang). The study into their symbolism, present forms, ritual practices, and spatial order provides means to better understand both continuity and change in the settlement process and cultural history of each locale.

Considering ritual architecture in relation to the landscape, this paper develops a framework of interpretation that recognises the interrelationships between lak ban/lak muang, the land, and a set of cultural traditions as crucial to the understanding of the meaning of places. Local people define 'place' on the basis of their inherited understanding of the past and their experiences of the present [Rotenberg 1993: xiv]. Lak ban and lak muang are thus viewed as part of phenomenal webs, which embraces cultural, social, and environmental milieux. In response to this point of

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view, *lak ban* and *lak muang* need to be interpreted through the experiences of builders and users. This approach is distinct from most architectural studies in which meanings of such religious architecture are interpreted within cosmological and canonical concepts.

The Geographical Distributions

Archaeological evidence, legendary history, and ethnographic studies reveal that the cult of *lak muang* has existed in a number of ancient cities of Southeast Asia such as Chiangmai, Lampang and Sukhothai in Thailand, Luang Phrabang in Laos, and Tanassarim, an ancient Mon territory in coastal Burma [Satya-wadhana 1988: 205-6, Mill 1997: 7]. The cult of *lak ban*, on the other hand, has been preserved in both Buddhist-oriented and animistic-oriented communities. These include the Tai and Mon-Khmer speaking groups of northern and northeastern Thailand, Shan State in Myanmar, northern Vietnam, Xishuang-banna in southern China, northern Laos, and northwestern Cambodia.

In northern Thailand, the cult of lak ban is found in highland groups such as the Lwa, Karen, and Lahu. For Buddhist lowland communities, the cult has been practiced exclusively in Shan (Tai Yai) villages concentrated in Mae Hong Sorn and the upper area of Chiangmai beyond the Ping river basin; and Tai Lue/Yong communities in the northeastern part of Chiangmai and most parts of Lamphun. In Northeast Thailand, the Laotian Thai villages appear to be the only lowland Buddhist communities in which the cult of *lak ban* has been found. It is interesting to note that up to the present time there has been no report on the existence of *lak ban* in Khmer villages in the lower Mun river basin of Northeast Thailand. However, recent research has revealed that village posts can be found in the circular villages of the Khmer in the Puok Valley northwest of Angkor. This tradition is nonetheless distinct from other areas of Cambodia [Moore (et al) 1999: 6].

The Myths of Origin

The provenance of *lak ban* and *lak muang* is in dispute. A number of ethno-historical studies have propounded different theories. Skinner (1957) has seen *lak muang* as an Indic-derived feature, which probably evolved from *Shiva-linga*, a Hindu phallic symbol of creative power. Terwiel (1978) argued that the cults of *lak ban* and *lak muang* are also found in White and Black Tai communities in Vietnam, which, unlike other Tai groups, preserved many of the features of archaic Tai culture, characterised by animistic practices, and never established cultural contacts with the Khmer. Extended beyond Terwiel's discussion, Satyawadhana's explanation (1988), based on extensive archaeological, ethnographic, and historical evidence, seems to be the most plausible, considering the geographical distribution of the cults described earlier. She noted that the matrix of *lak ban* and *lak muang* was pre-Indianised society and perhaps was associated with megalithic cultures, within which the Austro-asiatic groups played a predominant role in the development of the cult. Historical evidence that may support this hypothesis includes archaeological artefacts and written

records or *tamnan*. Such evidence portrays this cult as being originally practised among the Mon-Khmer speaking groups. Over time, through cultural assimilation, the Tai adopted this cult to their own culture [see also Nghiem Van 1990:77].

Symbolic Significance

Just like the cultural origins, the meanings and ritual practices associated with *lak ban* and *lak muang* are complex. Having socio-political implications, they are related to the cult of chiefdoms, a cultural trait of pre-Buddhist Southeast Asian society [Wolters 1999: 112]. According to the 'chiefdomships' structure, settlement domains were divided into *muang*, ruled over by a chief (*čhao*) who was a member of a chiefly lineage. Chieftains, upon whom the prosperity and solidarity of the domains depended, were considered the centre of spiritual authority and political power. Among the Tai, the cult of chiefdoms derived its legitimacy from the cult of the territorial spirits, celestial deities, and ancestral beliefs [Keyes 1995: 28]. As chieftains, when they were alive, were responsible for protecting, mobilising, and bringing benefits to settlements, their burial sites, after their death, became centres for ancestor worship [Wolters 1999: 19].

Mus (1975: 39) noted that many important archaic cults among indigenous societies in northern mainland Southeast Asia sought to establish a relationship between material forms and the authority of chieftains. The use of wooden posts as material embodiments of the chief of the political domains can still be seen in some highland societies. For example, the animist Lwa have preserved the ancient cult which associated the post, installed in the centre of the village, with the community leader. Today, this post, called *sakang* in Lwa, is erected anew upon the accession of a new village headman.[2] The belief in the village post as the representation of chieftains parallels that of the archaic Tai in Vietnam. According to Maspero (1929 & 1950), the *lak muang* of the White Tai is associated with the chief and is uprooted and renewed at the instatement of a new chief [Davis 1984: 274].

Related to the establishment of the village, the *lak ban* was erected before other village structures were constructed. Reflecting a chiefdom social structure in early times, the *lak ban* symbolises the leader of pioneer settlers who planted the post to demarcate the village territory. Serving as the spiritual centre for the villagers, the *lak ban* is imbued with symbolic power, which concerns promoting social integrity, peace, and protection for the villagers. These have made the village post a focus of village ritual activities, around which communal congregation occurs.

The association between the village's pioneer leader and the village post is, however, true in the case of the villages in northern Thailand. The perception of

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Laotian Thai people in Northeast Thailand is different. The village posts, called *bu ban* or the 'navel of the village', symbolise the pre-occupying spirits of the land. They assume the same spiritual functions as the ancestral founder spirit or *phi pu ta* (lit. the spirits of village maternal and paternal grandfathers), with a shrine on the outskirts of the village. In other words, the symbolism of the village posts of the Northeast parallels that of the village guardian spirit (*sya ban*) of northern Thailand. The Laotian Thai villagers believe both themselves and agricultural fertility to be subject to the power of the village spirit residing in the post at *bu ban*. The Laotian Thai lak ban is thought to be the abode of the spirit hereditary noble called Chao Pu Mahesak, who is the lord of the land. The connection between the village post and spirit beliefs (*phi*) is an important aspect distinguishing the northeastern paradigm from northern Thai; that is, the *lak ban* in Tai Lue/Yong villages instead represents the chief founder. Parallel the Laotian Thai tradition of *lak ban* is the cult of *phra phum* found exclusively in Khmer villages in the Puok Valley northwest of Angkor [Moore (et al) 1999: 6]. Separated from an ancestral founder' s shrine (*neak ta*) often placed at the perimeter of the village, the spirit posts, representing the lord of the land, marked the centre of the domain. This has highlighted the complexity and the ambiguity of the cultural origins of *lak ban*.

Architectural Attributes

Although the spatial position of *lak ban* and *lak muang* is specific, their architectural characteristics vary between locales. The variations in design and form imply diverse cultural beliefs and inspirations. The earliest form of *lak ban*, however, is thought to have developed from trees, which embodied the fertility of the ancient chief's political domain.[3] In a number of Tai principalities of the upper Mekhong river basin, such as Keng Tung and Payak, town and village posts are represented by big trees, notably Banyan trees[4] [Sethakul 1996: 52]. Today, the *lak ban* and *lak muang* are manifested in different patterns ranging from one simple post to a group of posts erected in a particular arrangement. However, a single post probably represents the archetypal form.

Lak ban and *lak muang* are normally made of hardwoods, such as teak, sandalwood, and jackfruit wood. However, the concrete revolution has gradually replaced the original construction materials in many villages, for reasons of availability and durability. In general, the *lak ban* has no structure built over it. In some cases, it can be enclosed by low fences. The average height of the post ranges from 0.30-1.20 m., while it is generally believed that the *lak muang* of the Tai principalities represents the height of the historic ruling prince and has a diameter about five times the size of his fist [Guelden 1995: 89].

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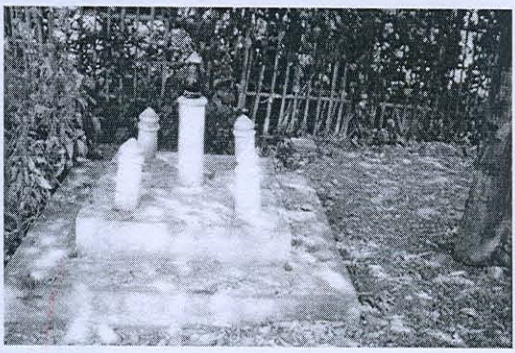
[3] Levy, P. (1943: 316) 'Le Sacrifice du buffle et la prediction du temps a Vientiane', *Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme, Vol.6,* quoted by Davis (1984:273)

[4] See more on Telford, J.H. (1937: 167-8) 'Animism in Keng Tung State', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. 27, No.2

The style and elaboration of *lak ban* depend primarily upon two distinct motivations: the artistic values of the craftsman who constructed the post, and the characteristics handed down from earlier generations. For example, in the lowland Buddhist society of northern Thailand, the traditional design of the village posts reflects to some extent an anthropomorphic idea. The *lak ban* and *lak muang* are also referred to as *ĉhai ban* and *ĉhai muang* (the heart of the village and the town). These terms contribute to the iconographic representation of the posts. The distinctive feature is a lotus-bud shaped finial, which symbolises the shape of the human heart and is conceptualised as the container of the human soul.

The development of cultural beliefs is sometimes manifested through the transformation of the architectural characteristics and patterns of ritual structures. Indic concepts have played a primary role, supplying new motifs and designs to both village and city posts. Among Tai Lue/Yong villages in the Ping/Wang river basin today, the most ubiquitous form of *lak ban* consists of five pillars. The Indic-influenced design displays the formalisation of a basic pattern of the cosmic axis or Buddhist cosmological diagram. The central pole is the tallest and is surrounded by four smaller posts in a square arrangement. The central post represents the axis of the Universe—Mount Meru, while the other four pillars arranged in a square embody tutelary deities of the four directions of the Universe (*Cattulokapala*). In addition, Buddhist influences are also expressed in the design of the city pillars, notably the Chiangmai City Pillar. Although the pillar of other northern Thai towns has a bulbous top, the present form of the Chiangmai City Pillar, said to be originally made of stone, is reminiscent of the stupa, with embedded Buddha images.



Five-post style of lak ban, with the tallest in the centre surrounded by four small posts, in Tai Yong village, Lamphun

Elsewhere in Thailand, *lak ban* of Laotian Thai villages, for instance, exhibit different architectural patterns from the northern Thai paradigms. The commonly found designs in Northeast Thailand are wooden posts, with the spire decorated with ringed motifs and surmounted by pointed or bulbous finials. In many cases, the number of *lak ban* in Laotian Thai communities reflect the agricultural productiveness of the village. Whenever the village faces drought or infertile soil, the *lak ban* receives communal veneration and ritual offerings. On this occasion, a new post is added [Suthitham 1997: 117]. Therefore, *lak ban* in Northeast Thailand can consist of one post or a group of posts. But the most common design is a group of five wooden posts, with the larger central one surrounded by shorter four ones. These patterns are also found in Khmer villages of Northwest Angkor.

Lak Ban as the symbolic landscape

The *lak ban*, serving as the material symbol of the centre, reflects to some degree the cosmological idea of indigenous beliefs. The prosperity of the village relies on the protective power originating from the *lak ban*, which, as previously mentioned, symbolises the centrally located and hierarchically highest figure, the village founder chief [Tooker 1996: 328]. The centre of settlement domains thus represents a locus where potency emanates and spreads in different directions, yet is limited to the village boundary. Upon the establishment of a new village, the positioning of *lak ban* requires ritual observances, which reflect the idea of ancient cosmology. The centre of the domain is seen as the cosmic axis or *axis mundi*, surrounded by the quadrants of the four cardinal points of compass. To create a sacred axis, a bamboo post on top of which crossed sticks form the four arms pointing out in the four cardinal directions, is planted on the proposed site. By the next morning, if the post has not been disturbed, it marks an auspicious position for the village centre and, in turn, the *lak ban*. In some cases, such a sacred centre also marks the position for the central post of the house of the village ruler. [ibid: 329].

Crucial to an understanding of how settlements developed in relation to ritual architecture, the correspondence between village and city forms is to be examined. To a considerable extent, the spatial position of ritual architecture in these two spatial phenomena echoes similar worldviews and probably developed from the same models. The religio-cosmological underpinning seen at the village level is also vividly expressed at the city level. In past centuries, in a number of historic Tai principalities, such as Chiangmai, Sukhothai, and Keng Tung in Shan State, villages were part of the urban fabric, within which the city centre was perceived as a ritual centre and the traditional seat of ruling princes. In this sense, the city centre was associated with political power, which was architecturally represented by palaces and royal monasteries. These centres were once also the sacred place where royal ceremonies and funerary rites were held [Ongsakul 1994: 10].

Often associated with the *lak ban* is a village communal space or '*klang ban*'. The term suggests a constituent part of the anthropomorphic system of spatial representation in archaic beliefs. Common among indigenous societies in many parts of the world, a relation of structural homology is established between the human body and the settlement forms [Hallpike 1979: 288]. This spatial representation is clearly illustrated in most Tai villages of northern and northeastern Thailand.[5]

Based on an anthropomorphic model, the village should consist of three different positions; head (*hua*), centre (*klang*), and feet (*tai*). [6] In the Tai

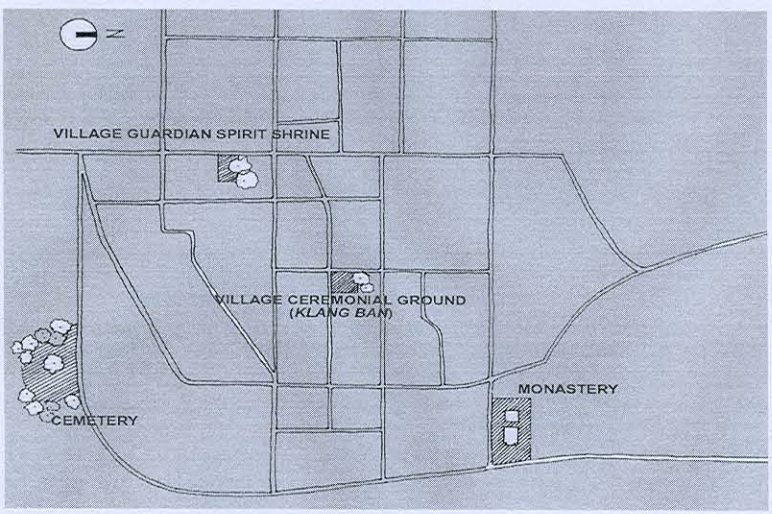
[5]For the analysis of Laotian Thai, see Formoso, Bernard (1990).

[6] This model is also the case for the Laotian Thai villages of Northeast Thailand.

worldviews, there is a metaphorical correspondence between the human body: head, centre, and feet, and the ordering of certain ritual sites. The monastery is to be at the head of the village or *hua ban* (usually aligned to the north), the village post represents the centre (*klang ban*), and the village spirit shrine (*ho sya ban*) and the village cemetery (*pa heo*) are located at the feet of the village or *tai ban* (usually aligned to the south).

The significance of 'centre' is not only manifested in an anthropomorphic system of thoughts, but also associated with aspects of astrology and cardinal directions. Centrally-located elements serves as a focus of both astrological and ritual attention. In the village level, the importance of 'centre' is reinforced by *klang ban* and *lak ban*. These elements become symbols of spiritual unity, where the horoscope of the community depends upon the moment they were located. In this sense, astrological calculation was required to determine auspicious date and time in order to create favorable circumstances for all inhabitants. In terms of directional orientation, hua and tai of the village are identified with certain cardinal points of compass. In northern Thailand, N-S placement of *hua ban* and *tai ban* reflects both settlement patterns corresponding to the alignment of the river and the belief in auspiciousness of the north, besides the east, for the Buddhist Tai.

The conceptual correlation between the human body and the settlements is also mirrored in ritual expressions. Given that the village is viewed as a living being, the life-prolonging ceremony is performed annually to reassure good fortune and renew the spiritual power of the village. This ceremony is particularly associated with the *lak ban*, which is conceptualised as the centre of the human soul. However, the village life-prolonging ceremony is always performed at *klang ban* even if the *lak ban*



Plan of a northern Thai village, Ban Tan Tai in Hod district, Chiangmai, showing locations of village ritual centres

does not exist. In this case, an open-sided pavilion, called a sala klang ban, is built to serve not only ritual requirements, but also as an architectural symbol of the village centre.

In general, the annual rites and grand offerings to the *lak ban* are generally held on the traditional Thai New Year Day. The villagers may refer to this ceremonial offering as 'renewing the village post' (*paeng čhai ban*) or 'village life-prolonging' (*suep chata ban*). As New Year symbolises a new lease on life, the rites are performed to invoke the spiritual power of the post to renew protection for the village, to expel existing malevolent and inauspicious forces, and to request a blessing for the community's prosperity. When the village faces ill fortune, life-prolonging rites and the worship of the Four Lords are performed at the centre of the village where the *lak ban* is located. In the rites, sets of offerings arranged on large woven bamboo trays are made; four of them placed at the four corners of the village and one at the centre. A sacred white thread is utilised to connect the *lak ban* symbolically and ritually with every house compound. This is followed by monks' chanting at the *lak ban* upon the congregation of the villagers. After the rites conclude, *ta laeo*, a star-shaped talismanic figure made of seven layers of plaited bamboo strips or *lalang* grass, is suspended in front of each dwelling unit. The potency of *ta laeo* is believed to expel all adversity, misfortune, and malevolent spirits, and provide an auspicious sign for a prosperous life in the coming year.

As previously stated, the centre of the village can be considered analogous to the centre of the city. A comparison of the spatial order of ritual architecture in the village and the city reveals that they are constructed according to a common set of structuring principles. Chiangmai can be seen as one possible example. The Chiangmai City Pillar, according to chronicles, was originally erected in the area called *sai du muang*, or the navel of the city, which represented the geographical centre of the city. Stemming from the concept of a homology between the human body and settlement forms, the city was viewed as a 'living' entity. The centre of the city corresponded to the position of the navel, which was represented by the city pillar [Ongsakul 1996: 390-1]. Also similar to the village level, the life-prolonging rite or *suep chata* was held annually to maintain the prosperity of the city. Although it is generally believed that the *lak muang* was shifted to its present location in the 18th century, this sacred ceremony has been performed at the navel of the city or *sai du muang* up to the present.

In recent times the cult of *lak ban* and *lak muang* has been in gradual decline. It does not exist in all the villages or towns of the groups mentioned above. This phenomenon can be linked to the rise of Buddhist symbols. The stupa and a Buddhist monastery have become increasingly important as the ritual focus representing both the centre of the domain and the centre of the Universe in Buddhist cosmological concepts. Traditionally, city and village in Thailand are generally seen by scholars as embodiments of Buddhist cosmology of power. With a view to emphasise Buddhism, there is a clear distinction between 'Buddhist space' and 'spirit space' within the spatial oppositions, i.e. centre and pe-

riphery. However, as mentioned, this interpretation cannot be applied to all cases. Differences in how the centre is marked indeed reveal the religious and cultural ideologies influencing the society at time, and a clear-cut distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist beliefs cannot be easily drawn.

Summary

Lak ban and *lak muang* serve as organising elements of the settlement form and define the village and city as a physical unit. Symbolically demarcating the territory of the settlement, they represent the point from which urban and village structures grow. In addition, their specific spatial arrangement highlights the prestige of the centre underlying the traditional settlement landscapes. This concept occupies a significant place in the indigenous system of spatial order. In a symbolic sense, *lak ban* and *lak muang* embody the legitimate power of historical chieftains or headmen and are conceptualised as the focus of spiritual and political power which is associated with promoting social harmony. In pre-urbanised settlements, political and spiritual power was embodied in a local chief. This relationship was represented by the post established at the centre of the domain. Likewise the city level, the focus of power, represented in architecture by a pillar and the stupa at the centre, was associated with the ruling princes or kings. In this sense, specific rituals had to be performed around the post in order to assure enduring power and to renew social ties.

Traditionally, *lak ban* and *lak muang* are associated with territorial behaviour. They do not direct at representational realism but derives from a cultural repertoire of symbol and metaphor. Through time, the meanings of these cultic images have been transformed. They have been ritually integrated into Buddhist practices. In this respect, it can be thought that ancient cosmology, Buddhist symbols, and spirit cults are characteristic features interacting one another to form an ideology of settlement in traditional Southeast Asia.

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