

# The Meaning of The Shen Nong Da Di's (神农大帝 Shen Nong Da Di) Birthday Ceremony at Ngo Kok Ong Temple Cibarusah, West Java

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Received : 23 October 2023

Accepted : 9 January 2024

Published : 22 March 2024

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## Abstract

This article discusses the meaning of the tradition Shen Nong Da di's birthday ceremony (sejit) at Ngo Kok Ong Temple, Cibarusah, West Java. Ngo Kok Ong temple put Shennong Dadi in Hokkien dialect is called Sin Long Tay Te which means Agricultural Emperor as the main deity. The research methodology and data collection techniques used are qualitative methods. Data collection by in-depth interviews and participant observations. Observations and participant observation carried out during the ceremony of Shen Nong's birthday from 26 June 2019 to 29 June 2019 with a descriptive analysis design. The purpose of this research is to describe the meaning of traditions at the Shen Nong's birthday ceremony. The results of the research show that there are various traditions during this ceremony, prayer together, mediumship such as making amulet, slashing the tongue, stamping on coals lion dance and liong performances, and the tradition of electing locu. These various traditions have religious functions, social functions and psychological functions. Apart from that, the contained meaning in this tradition is the symbolic meaning and philosophical meaning for every Chinese community.

## Keywords

Ceremony; Ngo Kok Ong Temple; Philosophical Meaning; Symbolic Meaning; Tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Ngo Kok Ong Temple is located on Jalan Raya Loji Cibarusah No. 26, Cibarusah Kota Village, Cibarusah District, Bekasi Regency. This temple is close to the Cibarusah market and known as Cibarusah Chinatown. According to the one of the temple administrators named Mrs. Swan Nio, Ngo Kok Ong Temple was founded in 1684 by a Chinese landlord named Tan Asiat who brought a stone with the inscription Wugu Dadi Shen Wei (五谷大帝神位 Wǔgǔ Dàdì Shén Wèi). The location of the Ngo Kok Ong Temple is

in the middle of a 1.2 hectare rice field area. Initially, this temple was just a small building on the ground with a stone placed in the middle room for praying to the God Shen Nong. The temple functions as a place of worship and also as a means of unifying ethnic Chinese descendants. In the Ngo Kok Ong temple there is also the Virya Dharma Temple which is a Tridharma school which consists of three teachings (三教 Sān jiào), namely Buddhism, Confucianism and Taosime. At the Ngo Kok Ong Temple, many of the ethnic Chinese people who live around this place are married to native people but still help take care of the Temple. Even though they have different religions and beliefs, they can live in harmony side by side.

In Mandarin, Ngo Kok Ong Temple is called 五谷王 (wu gu wang). The name Ngo Kok Ong Temple is taken from the name of the main god in this temple, namely God Shen Nong who is believed to be the ruler of the five agricultural seeds. Ngo Kok Ong Temple has various deities such as Siang Te Ya (玄天上帝 Xuán tiān shàngdì), Shen nong Dadi (神农大帝 Shénnóng Dàdì), Pa kung (土地公 Tǔdì Gōng) and Pa poh (土地婆 Tǔdì Pó), Kwan Im Po Sat (观音菩萨 Guān Yīn Pú Sà), Kwan Kong (关公 Guān Gōng), Tjay Sen Lo Ya (財神爺 Cǎi Shén Yé), Tong Nian Ta Soy (当年太岁 Dāng nián Tàisui), Yi Long Shain Khiun (二郎神 Èr Lang Shén), Hok Tek Tjeng Sin (福德正神 Fú Dé Zhèng Shén), and Fa Kong Ta Thie (华光大帝 Huá guāng dàdì). Every year Ngo Kok Ong Temple holds ceremonies honoring the Gods and Goddesses, one of which is the birthday ceremony of the God Shen Nong as the main deity in this temple.



**Figure 1.** Ngo Kok Ong Temple, Cibusah

In Indonesia, the birthday of God Shen Nong is celebrated on the 25th of the 5th month of the Chinese Lunar Year. In 2019, the ceremony of God Shen Nong's birthday fell on June 27 2019. A series of events celebrating the 335 th birthday of God Shen Nong at the Ngo Kok Ong Temple in Ciba-

rusah were held from June 26 2019 – June 29 2019. This article aims to describe the meaning of the birthday of the god Shen Nong ceremony at the Ngo Kok Ong Temple and show variations in Chinese belief ceremonies.

Opposite the Ngo Kok Ong temple there is a building for Tridharma worshippers called Vihara Virya Dharma. Inside the monastery there are Tridharma altars, namely the Sakyamuni Buddha altar (釋迦牟尼佛 Shìjiā móu ní fó), the Tai Siang Lao Kun altar (太上老君 Tàì ShàngLǎo Jūn), and the Confucian altar (孔夫子 Kǒng Fū Zǐ), these three represent Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. On the left side of the temple altar there is the altar of the goddess Kwan Im and on the right side there is the altar of the god Kwan Kong. The last place of this temple is the Peng An well (平安 Píng'ān) which is located behind the temple. In the Peng An well room there is an altar for Eyang Surya Kencana and also Queen Mother Nyilarasati who are respected by the local community. The figure of Queen Mother Nyilarasati is described as looking like a dragon with the body of a buffalo who has a philosophy of soil fertility and what is unique is that the wells in this place never dry out even though there is a long dry season.



**Figure 2.** Vihara Virya Dharma

Barthes developed semiotics into 2 levels of signs to designate levels of meaning, namely the level of denotation and connotation. Denotation is the level of signification that explains the relationship of signifier and signified to reality, producing an explicit, direct and definite meaning. Connotation is the level of sign that explains the relationship between signifier and signified in which non-explicit, indirect and uncertain meaning operates (Yusita Kusumarini, 2006:46).

Barthes saw another aspect of signification, namely myths which mark a society, namely cultural references (sourced from existing culture) which are used to explain symptoms or realities designated by explanatory symbols which in fact are the connotative meaning of existing symbols with reference to history (in addition to culture). In other words, myth functions

as a deformation of a symbol which then presents certain meanings based on the historical and cultural values of society (Pawito, 2007: 164)

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this article is a qualitative research method, understanding the facts that occurred and can be observed or felt directly. The techniques used by the author in collecting and processing data are observation. Observation is conducted before and during Shen Nong's Birthday Ceremony at Ngo Kok Ong Temple, Cibarusah, held on June 26 2019 - June 29 2019. Participant observation, the researcher participates in research activities by helping as a receptionist, observing and recording the process of the God Shen Nong's Birthday ceremony event at the Ngo Kok Ong Temple, Cibarusah. In-depth interview, the author collected data from directly interviewing temple administrators, such as Mr. Isan Yusup Virya Dharma Foundation Chairman, Ms. Swan Nio as Chairman of the Virya Dharma Temple, and Mr. Aliaw as treasurer of the Virya Dharma Foundation. Also literature study, collecting data from books, journals; and dictionary related to research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Shen Nong *Sejit* Ceremony

Many temples also unknowingly carry out Taoist ceremonies, apart from Yuhuang Shangdi's birthday ceremony, another ceremony is a ceremony to Taisui 太歲, either in the form of protection or expression of thanks, either because of the chiong / ciong 冲 factor. This does not need to be disputed but must be seen as the influence of Taoism and the existence of harmonious interactions in the beliefs held by Chinese people (Cangiato, 2014).

Temple ceremonies show the influence of local culture or local beliefs, in this temple gets the influence of Sunda culture. As stated historical fact shows that the cultural relationship between the Javanese and the Chinese is harmonious and without any cultural conflicts. This harmonious acculturation of Javanese-Chinese culture can be used as a reflection material to re-strengthen the sense of nationalism (Alam, 2023).

Ngo Kok Ong temple is located in Cibarusah. Based on history, Cibarusah District was originally part of Bogor Regency. That is the reason the residents of Cibarusah District speak Sundanese. After Bekasi experienced expansion (at that time there was no Bekasi City), Cibarusah District then entered the Bekasi area. However, the residents still belonging to a monolingual community (only using and mastering Sundanese) (Puspahaty, 2017)

Gods and goddesses' birthday ceremonies are generally held to celebrate the birth of the main deities in a temple and are also known as *sejit* (生日 Shēngri) in the Hokkien dialect. The birthday ceremony of God Shen Nong at Ngo Kok Ong Temple is celebrated on the 25th of the 5th month of the Chinese New Year, while a series of special ceremonies are held from 26

June 2019 to 29 June 2019. This special event commemorates the birthday of God Shennong Dadi (神农大帝 Shénnóng Dà dì ) as the main deity in Ngo Kok Ong temple. The peak day of the *sejit* ceremony is June 27 2019. Various events and rituals are held at the *sejit* event before and after the peak day. People come from various areas such as Jakarta, Karawang, Cikarang and surrounding areas.

Ngo Kok Ong Temple prepares for the *sejit* event 3 months before the event by forming a *sejit* ceremony committee team. The preparations made include collecting funds for event needs, making various permission letters for the event to take place, and inviting donors and sympathizers to jointly attend the sacred ceremony of Ngo Kok Ong. Attached to the invitation is a schedule of events from 26 June 2019 – 29 June 2019 starting from a schedule of group prayers, stage entertainment, karaoke and solo organ, liong and barongsai, tongue-slashing and ember-stomping rituals, *kongco* (deity) offering auctions, mutual palanquin rituals around the temple, locu selection for the 2019-2020 period and also dinner together.

### **The First Day Ceremony**

The temple administrators prepare offerings to be placed on the table in front of the altar of God Shen Nong. Several devotees were seen coming to pray regularly and bringing offerings to be placed on the altar with the aim of making the gods feel happy and giving blessings to their families. In the backyard of the temple, a kitchen has been prepared to prepare dinner for the donors, congregation and invited guests who will come.

Conception of the sacred in Chinese culture is highly determined by time. Transformation of something mundane or profane into sacred is highly determined by time. From Chinese religious festivals appear transformations of the sacred and the profane. (C.D. Hartati, T. Rudyansjah, 2021)

The series of events celebrating God Shen Nong's birthday on the first day of June 26 2019 began with making amulet paper (符 *fú*) or hu in Hokkien dialect. The writing of amulet paper is carried out starting at 16.00 WIB by the medium (*tangsin*) who are used to carrying out this ritual. The making of amulet paper is carried out in front of the Siang Te Ya altar (玄天上帝 Xuán tiān shàngdì). First, the medium stands in front of the altar and the other medium recites a certain mantra and burns a large yellow amulet paper.

When the ceremony for the deity's birthday, and Capgomeh, people often asked for hu paper in the temple. People use or keep hu paper to avoid unwanted things, misfortune, protection from bad things. Before it became sacred, Hu paper as a talisman was ordinary because it was an everyday item in a paper print. However, he changed the function to something sacred in the ceremony. The hu paper changes from ordinary to something sacred through a ceremonial process performed by spirit medium (*tangsin*.) This *tangsin* made changes to the hu paper. The *tangsin* blood that comes out in

a trance, it is then written onto the hu paper, which becomes sacred. (Hartati, 2021)

When the medium is in a trance condition, the tongue slashing ritual will immediately be carried out. The medium put a sharp sword on his tongue and rubbed it repeatedly until blood came out of his tongue and collected it on a small plate to be used as ink to write certain characters on amulet paper. Before slashing the tongue ritual, the medium will fasting first. They don't eat meat and only eat vegetables to cleanse the dirt in the body. This amulet paper will later be distributed to the people who come on the third day. Because on the third day the people who come will be more to see more the ember stamping ritual.

Initially amulet was paper containing written wishes, prayers and blessings by *Daoshi* as Taoist priests or mediums which some people believed had been entered by the spirits of gods or ancestors, which Taoists believed was a blessing from the Gods and Goddesses as a medicinal herb for cure of disease or. Then as development progressed, amulet paper began to be stuck on the front doors of people's houses, which was believed to protect the house and its contents from the influence of bad energy and increase luck. Apart from that, tangsin also gives blessings to those who are in ciong this year as a ritual to ward off evil to avoid danger and be given blessings.

At 00.00 in the morning a sacred prayer of God Shennong Dadi (神农大帝 Shénnóng Dàdì) was held. This prayer was carried out by all administrators and people who present. The incense stick is rolled in gold paper and two candles. First, the congregation lights the candles and places them one by one on the left and right of the Siang Te Ya altar (玄天上帝 Xuán tiān shàngdì) and starts burning the incense. The prayer ends by burning the gold paper that has been arranged on the altar table in the hope that the desired prayer will be answered.

### **The Second Day Ceremony**

On the second day, the sacred ceremony of God Shen Nong begins with washing the statue of Shen Nong at 09.00 WIB. Chinese people have a tradition of cleaning altars and washing statue of Gods and Goddesses. The tradition of cleaning the god statue using flower water is usually done once a year before the Chinese New Year, namely after the 24th of the 12th month of the Chinese lunar Year. Because it is believed that at that time, the gods and goddesses ascend to the sky and leave their statues and altars on the 24th of the 12th month or the day before to report what they have recorded for one year.

A unique thing at Ngo Kok Ong temple is that the washing and changing of Shen Nong's robes is carried out on the sacred day of Shen Nong. Washing the statue of Shen Nong on his sacred day is a symbol of ethnic Chinese devotion to Shen Nong. The statue of Shen Nong is washed slowly with water mixed with fragrant flowers. After that, the statue of Shen Nong is dried with a clean cloth. Shen Nong's Divine Robe was also replaced with

a new one on this day. Washing of other god and goddess images is done as usual, namely one week before the Chinese New Year holiday.



**Figure 3.** Washing God Statue

In the afternoon at 11.00 WIB the medium spirits gather to do *thiam* where the coals are stepped on. Ask the gods and goddesses for blessings and smoothness during the ember stamping event. The medium spirit places the amulet paper in a bowl and then buries it on four sides of the burning embers, with the aim of taming the heat in the embers. At around 15.00 WIB, people began to arrive to recite the sacred chant together using the Tridharma teachings. The recitation of the chant begins with praying to Tian, by placing his hands together on his forehead as a way of expressing the highest respect. Followed by reading the chant according to the Padma Widya book as a guide to the Tridharma service published by the Indonesian Tridharma Buddhist Religious Council. What differentiates the chanting on normal days and on this special ceremony is the reading of the Wu Gu Jing (五谷经 Wǔgǔ jīng) The Classical Book of the Five Crops.

After finishing reading the sacred chants, the people enjoyed a meal prepared by the temple administrator. Eating together is a time to gather with friends or relatives who have not seen each other for a long time. The people present also believe that eating the food provided at the temple brings blessings to those who eat it ( *cia peng an/ chi ping an* 吃平安 ).

### **The Third Day Ceremony**

The third day of the sacred ceremony of Shen Nong begins at 10.00 WIB with a lion dance performance. This morning many people or invited guests came to watch the lion dance performance. Many children don't want to miss seeing the lion dance and barongsai performances. Ngo Kok Ong Temple itself has a barongsai association whose members are young people from around Cibarusah. At this ceremony, not only the barongsai association

from Ngo Kok Ong performed attractions, but there were also associations from Huang Ho Say Jakarta, Tiong Gie Say Cileungsi, and the Jonggol Putra Liong & Barongsai Association. They took turns performing the attraction by climbing iron poles installed in the temple yard.

In Chinese belief, the lion dance is believed to symbolize courage, stability and superiority. Apart from that, the lion dance also has the meaning of expelling evil spirits that disturb humanity. The lion dance attraction at this cool ceremony ends at 14.00 WIB. The event that is no less eagerly awaited by the people and residents around Cibusah apart from the lion dance attraction is the ember stamping event. At around 18.00, embers began to be lit on the ground approximately 7 meters long. The heat could be felt from a distance of 3 meters near the pile of burning embers. This did not make people step back, but instead they drew closer to see the person who would walk on the coals.



**Figure 4.** Step on the Embers Ritual

In the temple, the medium spirit and the people who will carry out the ritual of walking on the embers gather first to ask for prayers from the gods. The first to start this ritual is the medium spirit's temple by carrying the god's flag and waving it bravely. With bare feet without shoes, one by one people walked alternately over piles of burning embers. This ritual must be performed with full confidence and without fear within yourself. Everyone can take part in this ritual, regardless of religion or belief. Every 15 minutes the embers are turned over using a long block of wood so that the heat from the embers at the bottom changes to the top and lasts approximately 1 hour.

#### **The Fourth Day Ceremony**

The last day of the *sejit* ceremony reopened with lion dance attractions like yesterday. What makes it different is that the lion dances perform attractions accompanying the *tatung* (medium spirit in the Hakka language) *tatung* is a person possessed by the spirit of a god or ancestor. Accompanied by the



drum beats of lion dance music, *tatung* stands upright on a stretcher and places his foot on a sword blade. Apart from that, *tatung* also stuck a sharpened steel wire into his right cheek until it penetrated his left cheek. The presence of *tatung* at this special event is to ward off evil spirits and as a ritual to ward off evil to avoid negative things.

In the afternoon at 16.00 WIB, it's time to auction off the offerings placed on god's table. The items being auctioned are 4 gold tiger statues, cakes and a basket containing eggs and food ingredients. This auction event was chaired by the administrator of the Virya Dharma Foundation, Mr. Isan Yusup as chairman of the Foundation. The system used at the auction is that the person who bids with the highest price will take home the offering items placed on the *Kongco* table. The money collected at the auction will be put into foundation funds for the needs of the temple.

Finally, to close this ceremony, is *locu* election for the 2019-2020 period was held. *Locu* is a term for people who dedicate their lives to serving the gods in the temple with a term of office of one year. From the first day it was announced that registration was open to become al *locu*. The selection of candidates is not limited, so everyone has the right to nominate themselves as *locu* candidates. Devotion as a *locu* cannot be done in an easy way, but it is determined through the process of praying and communicating with the gods who will be given services using the *pwa pwee* media. The election began with a joint prayer for the *locu* candidates and one by one they raised objects made of wood to their foreheads and then dropped them. If an object falls while both are face down then it is interpreted as *mo pwee* or not accepted by god, if the object falls in a different direction then it is interpreted as *sio pwee* or accepted by god. The more *sio pwee* there are, the higher the chance of becoming a *locu*.

## CONCLUSION

Ngo Kok Ong *sejit* ceremony was held from June 26 2019 to June 29 2019. It was celebrated as thanksgiving and thanks to *Tian* and Shen Nong for all the services and blessings given to humans in the world. The *sejit* ceremony is a big ritual held by Ngo Kok Ong temple. This ceremony is celebrated the birthday of Shennong Dadi (神农大帝 Shénnóng Dàdì) as the main deity in Ngo Kok Ong temple. The peak day of the *sejit* ceremony is June 27 2019. Various events and rituals are held at the *sejit* of Shen Nong.

The *sejit* ceremony is still a routine tradition celebrated by the Chinese community to this day, because it has various traditions and rituals that are still held. Traditions and rituals which is held is praying together, the tradition of washing the statue of Shen Nong, the tradition of offering the offerings to Shen Nong, barongsai performances, the ritual of slashing tongues and stamping on embers. These various traditions have symbolic and philosophical meanings for Chinese society. There are also functions of this ceremony, containing religious functions, social functions and psychological functions.

The practice of honoring the gods as a form of folk religion is still a belief of the Chinese to this day. The ceremony held at Ngo Kong temple is a form of tradition of honoring gods (*baishen*) in Chinese religious practices that have existed. Cultural symbols in temple ceremonies can be seen in the use of one or three sticks of incense sticks, one for the gods and three for Tian. *Paipai* or respect for the temple god, and the *pwa pwee* action (throwing two pieces of wood to get different results, which means getting a yes answer) is an example of the use of cultural symbols. Apart from that, symbols also appear on the food served. All the food served contains a symbol of hope.

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