

Ethnic Identity and Buddhist Tradition: An Analysis on Ethnic Shan Festivals in Thailand

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Abstract

The concept of “Buddhism Without Borders” in this paper will be interpreted as when Buddhist people from one country migrate to another Buddhist country and still carry on their Buddhist tradition. Interestingly, the time and the place in carrying on the Buddhist tradition is also used as the time and place to express the ethnic identity in the context of the country they migrate into.

Today, there is a huge influx of migrant laborers from the neighboring countries, particularly from Myanmar, coming to work in Thailand. Shan people from the Shan State, Myanmar, is one of the ethnic groups from Myanmar who crosses border in the north of Thailand to work in Chiangmai province. Interestingly, the Shan people uses certain Buddhist temples in Chiangmai to carry on their Buddhist Shan festivals in the same tradition as they do in Shan State, Myanmar. Buddhist Thai temples in Chiangmai have thus become the venue in transmitting Buddhist Shan tradition as well as the “cultural contact zone” for social gathering and expressing Shan ethnic identity in the context of Thailand.

This paper illustrates how Shan Buddhist festivals have been “transplanted” to be performed in Thailand. The Shan festivals of poy awk-waa (welcoming the Buddha descending from heaven to earth) is selected as a case study to portray how Buddhist Shan festivals have become re-territorialized and how Shan ethnic identity is expressed through various means, e.g., costumes, food, performances, etc. in these festivals in the context of Thailand.

Introduction

Thailand and Myanmar are neighboring countries. When there are political problems, people then cross the border migrating to live in the other side of the border. Due to the conflict between the government and the ethnic groups in Myanmar, people of various ethnic groups from Myanmar have been migrating

to live in Thailand, particularly in the provinces of western and northern Thailand. Recently, there has been a huge influx of migrant laborers from Myanmar coming to work in Thailand. Shan people from Shan State, Myanmar, is one of the ethnic groups who crosses border in the north of Thailand to work in Chiangmai province.

But since both Thailand and Myanmar are predominantly Theravada Buddhist countries, the Shans as well as the Thais are Theravada Buddhists, they then share certain common religious traditions. Interestingly, the Shan people uses certain Buddhist temples in Chiangmai to carry on their Buddhist Shan festivals in the same tradition as they do in the Shan State, Myanmar. Buddhist Thai temples in Chiangmai have thus become the venue in transmitting Buddhist Shan tradition as well as the “cultural contact zone” for social gathering and expressing Shan ethnic identity in the context of Thailand.

The phenomenon of “Buddhism Without Borders” in this paper will then be presented as when people from one Theravada Buddhist country migrates to another Theravada Buddhist country, and still carry on their Buddhist traditions.

This paper will illustrate how Shan Buddhist festivals are performed in Thailand. Shan festivals of *poy awk waa* (*poy* meaning festival, *awk* meaning leaving, *waa* shortening from the Pali word, *wassa*, meaning rain or rainy season; it is a festival to welcome the Buddha back from his visit to preach his mother in *tavatimsa* heaven during the rain’s retreat) is selected as a case study to portray how a Buddhist Shan festival has become re-territorialized and how Shan ethnic identity is expressed through various means, e.g., costumes, food, performances, etc. in the Buddhist festival in the context of Thailand .

From Shan State to Thailand

The Shan people speak Tai language, the same language family spoken by Thai people in Thailand. Today, the majority of Shan people live predominantly in the Shan State, Myanmar. There are also other ethnic Shan people living in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, India; Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan, China; and Mae Hong Son, Chiangrai and Chiangmai provinces, Thailand.

Historically, since the sixth century, Mawk Khao Mao Luang Kingdom, an ancient Shan kingdom, was founded in the Salween riverine area where today is

the area between Dehong Prefecture, Western China and Shan State, Eastern Myanmar. The kingdom expanded its political power for centuries. Until the thirteenth century, the kingdom was invaded by China. The Shan king at that time immigrated his Shan people crossing the mountains to found a new kingdom which is in Assam, India today. During the time, the new rising center of Shan kingdom, Saenwi Kingdom, was founded in the area which is in present day Shan State, Myanmar. In the past, Shan kingdoms always had socio-political relations, e.g., trade, marriages, wars, etc. with the Burmese, Chinese and Lanna Thai kingdoms (See more detail in Sompong Wittayasakphan, 2001).

Under the British rule over Burma during the colonial period, the British established the Federation of Shan States uniting all the cities of the Shan people to counter balance with the Burmese power. In the year 1947, Shan State, Kachin State, Karen State and Chin State signed a Panglong Agreement to be together under the Union of Burma for 10 years with the agreement that after 10 years, they would have autonomous ruling right. However, in 1957, Burma broke the promise and did not allow all these states to be autonomous. This resulted in long lasting wars between the Burmese government and these ethnic minorities until today (See more detail in Pornpimol Trichot, 2000: 59-62).

Since all along, the Burmese government has treated the other ethnic minorities in their country not nicely, this resulted in the Shan, the Karen, the Mon, etc. migrating to live and work in Thailand. As a consequence, many Shan soldiers and people migrated into western and northern Thailand. The Shan army, which was previously situated in the Shan State near the border of Thailand, in 1958, moved to set their headquarters in Chiangmai, later on setting another headquarter in Chiangrai and Mae Hong Son, Thailand. In 1969, Shan United Revolution Army (SURA) was established at Piang Luang Village, Wiang Haeng District, Chiangmai (Wandi Santiwutmethi, 2008: 25-26).

During the past several decades, there was a series of Shan migrations from the Shan State to Thailand. Thus, there were Shan settlements in Mae Hongson in northwestern Thailand, in Chiangrai and Chiangmai in northern Thailand. Shan people who came long time ago have been, to a certain extent, assimilated with northwestern and northern Thai people. In the late 1990's, the on-going wars between Burmese army and Shan army resulted in a new series of Shan migration to Thailand.

Today, there must be over one million migrant laborers (registered and non-registered) from Myanmar working in Thailand (Huguet et al, 2011: 12). In Chiangmai, a large number of Shan migrants live in Wiang Haeng District in the border area but recently many of them fluctuated down to work in the city of Chiangmai since there are more job opportunities. Today there must be over a hundred thousand Shan people working as foreign wage labors in Chiangmai province.

Shan Buddhist Tradition: The Case of the 12 Months' Ritual

It is remarked by Buddhist scholars that in every Theravada Buddhist country, whether it is Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia, there tends to be local interpretation of Buddhism such that it creates some kind of folk Buddhism in each Theravada Buddhist country.

An example of folk interpretation of Buddhism is illustrated in Shan 12 month rituals in Shan folk life; the details are as follows (Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai, 2011):

- Month 1: *Poy pee mai*, celebrating Shan traditional new year, and the offering newly harvested rice to the monks
- Month 2: Monks' intensive meditation in the temples
- Month 3: Lighting fire to worship the Buddha and warm the Buddha images
- Month 4: Pilgrimage to pay worship to the Buddha's relics
- Month 5: *Poy Sang Long*, ritual of novice ordination, and *Poy Sang Khan*, celebrating new year
- Month 6: Watering the Bodhi tree
- Month 7: Merit-making and worshipping the city guardian spirits/Rain-making ceremony
- Month 8: Offering flowers and *poy khaw waa*, entering the rains retreat
- Month 9: Donating food and things to the temples
- Month 10: Offering food to the Buddha/worshipping Upakutta
- Month 11: *Poy awk waa*, leaving the rains retreat, making *jong para* to welcome the Buddha back from heaven to earth
- Month 12: Offering new robe to monks

The activities in the 12 month rituals illustrate Shan way of life that is interwoven with Buddhist tradition. Among the 12 month rituals, I would say that in Thailand *poy sang long* and *poy awk waa* are the most popular Shan rituals and can also be perceived by other ethnic groups as Shan cultural identity.

Poy sang long is a Shan tradition to ordain a young boy to be a Buddhist novice. What is interesting is the Shan's unique interpretation and performance of this tradition. Shan people interpret this tradition that a young boy who is becoming a novice is like when Prince Sidharata was leaving his laymanhood to enter monkhood. Thus, in the ritual, the boy would dress up colorfully and beautifully like a prince. Such creative interpretation enhances *poy sang long* to be popularly known as a Shan Buddhist tradition, particularly in the Shan State and in western and northern Thailand due to the colorful and the vivid parade of the young novice riding on horseback surrounded by his relatives and people from his village.

Poy awk waa is another tradition that can also be perceived as another of Shan's unique interpretation and ritualization of the Buddha's life history. When approaching the month of *poy awk waa*, every Shan household would build a *jong para* (*jong* meaning palace or temple, *para* meaning the Buddha), which is supposed to be a symbol of a palace or a pavilion to receive the Buddha back from heaven to earth by placing this *jong para* in front of each house. This tradition can also be perceived as a marker of Shan identity of Buddhist tradition.

Awk Waa Festival: The Narrative behind the Ritual Performed

During the rainy season in Theravada Buddhist countries, there is a tradition of monks residing in the temples without spending overnight elsewhere for three months. The starting month of the rains retreat is called *kharw waa*, meaning entering the rains retreat and the ending month is called *awk waa* meaning leaving the rains retreat.

Let me now cite the Shan's belief which is based on a story back to the Buddha's time since this following story is used to explain the origin of Shan *awk waa* ritual and performance:

After the Buddha was enlightened, he went up to heaven to preach his mother for three months. The Buddha told Makkhalana monk that he

would return to earth on the full moon day of the eleventh month. Makkhalana then told all human beings and animals to prepare to receive the Buddha. Knowing this news, all human beings and animals were overjoyed and prepared to receive him.

When that day came, *Indra* God magically built the golden and silver stairs from *tavatimsa* heaven to the earth. Human beings offered food and desserts to the Buddha. Mythical animals from *Himawan* forest, for example, *kinnaree*, a mythical half-man-half-bird creature, welcomed him by dancing gracefully as a gesture of paying respect to the Buddha. *Toh*, a mythical lion with beautiful long hair resembling Yak or Jammaree, also went to welcome the Buddha. People who could not go to receive the Buddha would make a small *jongpara*, a palace-like, in front of their house as a sign to welcome him.

Upon descending to earth, the Buddha surrounded by the six colored radiance creates bright light from heaven to earth and down through hell. This made all creatures see the Buddha and they were thus overwhelmed by his *parami* (religious charisma). The six colored radiance also shined on every beings and on the *jongpara* that every house prepared to welcome him." (Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai, 2011 and Social Research Institute, Chiangmai, 2008)

Referred to this narrative, the Shan then followed the tradition performed at the Buddha's time. The tradition of making *jongpara* at the temples and people's houses at the time of *awk waa* on the full moon day of the eleventh month has then become one of the identities of Shan tradition. Tannenbaum (2009: 181) describes the appearance of *jongpara* in Mae Hong Son province in Thailand, "It is usually made out of bamboo and displayed attached to a house or a temple; minimally it is a platform with a roof, although they can be more elaborate. Inside the platform, people place food and rice and other cooked offerings. Fruit and large vegetables are suspended underneath the platform."

Based on the above narrative, it is also a Shan tradition to perform *kinnaree* (*ging gala* or *nang nok* in Shan language) dances and *toh* dances in *awk waa* festival as gestures of welcoming the Buddha descending from heaven to earth. *Ging gala* and *toh* have then been used as markers of ethnic Shan dances to be performed in

various Shan festivals not only in *awk waa* festival but also in other festivals as well to express Shan cultural identity.

Expressing Shan Identity in *Awk Waa* Festival in the Buddhist Temples in Thailand

Today, in the city of Chiangmai, at the time of the Buddhist festivals, one would find a recent phenomenon of Shan migrant workers organizing Shan festivals and gathering at certain Buddhist temples in Chiangmai, particularly at Papao Temple and Kutao Temple. So, whenever there are Shan Buddhist festivals, e.g., *poy awk waa*, *poy sang long* (novice ordination), or *poy pee mai* (Shan new year), these Shan migrant workers use these two temples as the venue to conduct Shan ritual and performance and as their “cultural contact zone” for their social gathering.

Historically, Kutao Temple is an old Buddhist temple dating back to the 14th century. The pagoda in this temple is believed to house the relics of a brother of the King of Burma who died during the war between Ayuddhaya and Burma in the 16th century. The temple architecture is the combination between northern Thai and Shan style. Today, Kutao Temple is the place where Shan Language and Culture Association is located.

As for Papao Temple, it is also an old temple dating back to the 14th century. In the beginning, the place used to be an old palace of a king of Lanna, later on after the king died, a temple was built on this land. In 1891, a Shan lady who married the ruler of Chiangmai repaired the temple and built a pagoda with Shan style architecture, and later on she had a *vihara* built in order to enshrine a Shan style Buddha image. Since then, Papao Temple has been under the care of Shan people in Chiangmai.

On October 23rd 2010, I had a chance to collect field data regarding Shan festival of *poy awk waa* at Papao Temple and Kutao Temple. I was impressed by the crowd of Shan people in the temples. Both temples were filled with so many young Shan workers. Shan’s *jong para* were constructed and placed in the center of both the temples. Male and female Shan workers came to participate in the festival, placing the offering food and fruits at *jong para* as a means to pay respect to the Buddha. Shan’s religious activities also include the listening to the sermons

of the Shan monks and donating money to the temple due to the Buddhist beliefs and tradition.



Jong para at Papao Temples

During *awk waa* festival, Shan Buddhist belief was transmitted; *ging gala* and *toh* dances were performed to concretize the Buddhist narrative that these mythical animals came from the forest to welcome the Buddha descending from heaven.



Ging gala dance



toh dance

Identity of Shan performance based on Shan's Buddhist narrative

Interestingly, the two Buddhist temples are not just the venue to host the Shan Buddhist festivals, they have temporarily become *an imagined Shan land* where

one can buy Shan ethnic costumes and textiles, Shan food and merchandises, e.g., cosmetics, face powder, lipsticks, shoes, cds and dvds, books of Shan literatures, etc. Accordingly, the Buddhist temples in the city of Chiangmai have become the space to express Shan ethnic identity.



(Left) A crowd of Shan migrant workers participating in *poy awk waa* at Papao Temple.

(Right) Hanging fruits at *jongpara* offering to the Buddha



Shan ethnic costumes and T-shirts sold in the temple



Shan food sold in the temple



All kinds of merchandizes: dry food, books, cds, dvds from the Shan State, Myanmar

Being far away from their Shan State, Myanmar, there occurs the phenomenon of what social scientists call “re-territorialization,” meaning the creation of a new community in a new space, in this case, in the Buddhist temples in the city of Chiangmai. Festival time is then a good time and opportunity to express their Shan ethnic identity.

Compared to other ethnic migrant workers from Myanmar, e.g., Mon, Karen, Kachin, Akha, the Shan people better assimilate with the Thai considering their language, historical and cultural proximity. Assuming the cultural proximity between the Shan and the northern Thai people who speak the same language family, Shan migrant workers declare their existence and cultural identity to the northern Thai and Thai people in the Buddhist ritual time and venue. Their intention to integrate with the Thai people can be seen in other activities such as their “place-making” in Thai television news, their invitation of Thai government officials to preside over their various festivals.

Not only in *poy awk waa*, but also in other festivals, we can now see young Shan migrant workers gathering in Buddhist temples in Chiangmai. Announcements, e.g., posters, banners, news on television, websites, etc. concerning time and venue for *poy sang long*, *poy pee mai*, etc., have been publicly made in Chiangmai. Their attempts to be integrated with Thai people have been continuously remarked. Being Theravada Buddhists the same as Thai people make things easier for the Shan people to participate and assimilate in many other religious and social activities in Thai society.

Concluding Remarks

Buddhist tradition is a vital part of Buddhist people anywhere. Since “Buddhism has no borders,” in this paper, I have illustrated how Shan Theravada Buddhist people from Myanmar have used Buddhist temples in Chiangmai, Thailand through the cultural event of Buddhist festivals to transmit their Shan Buddhist tradition, as well as to express their Shan identity in the context of Thailand, a country of fellow Theravada Buddhist people.

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