

Palaung Buddhism and Ethnic Identity in Northern Thailand¹

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Abstract

Theravada Buddhism has long been associated with lowland Tai culture. In Thailand, Buddhism is a component of Thai nationalism and the government has actively promoted the propagation of Buddhism amongst ethnic minority groups as a means of assimilating non-Tai people into the Thai national body. Scholars have similarly treated the divide between upland and lowland cultures in part as a division between Buddhism in the lowlands and indigenous spirit and ancestor oriented traditions in the uplands. As upland Theravada Buddhists, the Palaung people have long been noted as an exception, yet today more and more upland groups are converting to Buddhism. In this article I explore the ways in which Buddhism serves as a means of drawing distinctions between the Palaung people of northern Thailand and their lowland Tai neighbours in order to illustrate the way in which the adoption of Buddhism by upland peoples does not necessarily indicate a significant shift in ethnic group identity.

¹ The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). A version of this article was presented at the ENITS Scholarship Research Presentation at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, on June 8th, 2009, and is based on fieldwork performed in connection with the author's dissertation.

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Introduction

The presence of the Palaung ethnic group within Thailand is relatively recent. While some Palaung report parents or grandparents working in Thailand prior to the 1960s, most Palaung residents migrated across the Thai-Burmese border in the late 1970s and early 1980s, fleeing violence in the neighbouring Shan State. As a non-Tai speaking population, the displaced Palaung were categorized as *chao khao* or 'hill tribes' within the social and political context of the day, with many having 'Karen' written on their ID forms for their 'tribe' (*pao*) as the state bureaucracy did not recognize 'Palaung' or 'Dara'ang' as an ethnic category at the time. The Palaung people differed, however, from the aggregate of other ethnic groups so classified insofar as they maintained a long tradition of Theravada Buddhism, specifically of the Yuan Buddhist form that once dominated the region during the time of the Tai Yuan kingdom of Lanna. In this article I discuss how this form of Buddhism is employed today as a means for drawing distinctions between the religious practices of the Palaung people and the Tai Yuan (*Khon Muang* or Northern Thai) people from whom this religious system originally derived. In doing so, I argue that the presence of Theravada Buddhism amongst upland ethnic minority groups in northern Thailand is not in itself indicative of shifts in ethnic identity, and may even serve as a means of expressing a distinct cultural identity vis-à-vis the dominant Tai speaking population.

Palaung

The ethnonym 'Palaung' refers primarily to speakers of Pale, Rumai, and Shwe languages. These languages are classified under the Eastern Palaungic group of languages, a sub-group of the Palaungic sub-branch of the Northern Mon-Khmer branch of the Mon-Khmer family of languages. The large majority of Palaung people residing in Thailand speak Pale, a language spoken by approximately 267,539 people in Burma, Thailand, and China, most of whom (257,539)

reside in Burma.³ The actual sub-grouping of Palaung people is likely much more complicated than the simple tri-partite division suggests, but an understanding of the diversity of Palaung languages, cultural traditions, and ethnic identity is hampered by the political situation in Burma, and a clearer picture must wait for a time when in-depth anthropological studies are once again possible within that country.⁴

The term Palaung comes from the Burmese language and was adopted by the English speaking world during colonial times. Palaung people use several related terms to refer to themselves depending on where they are from and which dialect they speak. In Namhsan township of Burma, where the majority of Palaung people are found, the term Ta-ang is used to refer to all Palaung sub-groups. In Thailand, Palaung people use the ethnonym 'Dara'ang' in reference to all Palaung people, and 'Dara'ang Re'ng' (Re'ng = red) to refer to their particular subgroup, which roughly corresponds with the English term Pale or Silver Palaung.

At present there are approximately 5,000 Palaung people living in Thailand, most of whom trace their origins back to villages located in the southern and eastern Shan State. The majority came fleeing the conflict in Burma which erupted following Ne Win's coup in 1962. The ongoing violence experienced by many Palaung villages in the southern Shan State, including forced conscription and labour, sexual assault, rape, and theft at the hands of several different armed groups, led to the abandonment of many Palaung villages in the 1970s and the migration of entire communities to areas closer to urban centres of the Shan State and the Thai-Burmese border.

The first Palaung settlement to be established in Thailand was No Lae, located close to the Royal Project Agricultural Research Centre on the mountain of Doi Angkang. This centre had been set up by the Royal Project on Hill Tribe Development and Welfare in

³ Raymond Gordon, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th edition (Dallas: SIL International, 2005), 21 April 2009 <www.ethnologue.com>.

⁴ Cf. Yasuyuki Mitani, "Palaung dialects: A preliminary comparison," *Southeast Asian Studies*, 15, 2 (1977): 193-212.

conjunction with the Joint United Nations-Thai Programme for Drug Abuse Control in Thailand, its purpose being to develop high-altitude crop substitutes for the opium that many upland communities had come to rely upon as their primary source of income.⁵ For several years the displaced Palaung people, along with members of other ethnic groups, lived in the marginal zone between Burma and Thailand, occupying camps along the ill-defined and contested border.

The status of Palaung people in relation to Thailand shifted in 1982 when King Bhumibol Adulyadej visited the agricultural research centre. The Palaung who had been living in the area were given an audience with the King in order to seek permission to settle permanently within Thailand. When the Palaung representatives met with the King they presented him with several old Buddha images they had brought with them from Burma and a complete set of Palaung women's clothing, both considered important markers of the group's ethnic identity. The King asked the representatives if they were Buddhists, and the men responded that they were. He then gave them permission to live in Thailand and presented the group with 5,000 baht to construct a new Buddhist temple. No Lae thus became the first Palaung village of Thailand.

As land was in short supply in No Lae, new arrivals to Thailand were forced to establish villages deeper inside Chiang Mai province, firstly in the district of Fang and later in Chiang Dao. While I have visited most of the Palaung villages of Thailand, my fieldwork was undertaken primarily in the Palaung village of Pang Daeng Nai of Chiang Dao district, and most of the data presented here derives from interviews and observations that took place in this particular location and the surrounding Palaung villages of Huai Pong, Mae Chon, Pang Daeng Nok, and Pang Daeng Klang, as well as the research conducted at Wat Den in Mae Taeng district, the temple of Khruba Jao Theaung.

⁵ Michael Howard and Wattana Wattanapun, *The Palaung In Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001) 81.

Yuan Buddhism and Identity

It is significant that Palaung people entered Thailand through a space opened up by state intervention into the lives of people categorized as 'hill tribes'. As relative newcomers to the country, the Palaung were not considered one of the officially designated 'hill tribes'.⁶ However, their agricultural practices (swidden agriculture), their high altitude villages, and their non-Tai language led state agents and other producers of ethnic categories to affix this label upon members of the group. Their lives were, thenceforth, shaped by this categorical ascription, which included heavy state intervention into village life in the form of development projects, crop substitution programs, watershed protection initiatives, drug surveillance, forestry encroachment crackdowns, and social marginalization brought about through both a compassion for and discrimination against the so-called 'hill tribe' population.

Unlike other groups subsumed beneath the label of 'hill tribe', however, and similar to many Tai ethnic groups of Thailand, the Palaung have a long tradition of Theravada Buddhism and consider it as an important part of their ethnic identity. While the exact conditions under which Buddhism was adopted by the Palaung are unclear,⁷ the

⁶ There are nine official ethnic groups classified as 'hill tribe' or '*chao khao*': Lua' (Lawa), Htin, Khamu, Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Karen. (Cf. Wanat Bhruksarsri, "Government policy: Highland ethnic minorities," in *Hill Tribes Today: Problems in Change*, eds. John McKinnon and Bernard Vienne (Bangkok: White Lotus-Orstom, 1989) 6.)

⁷ Leslie Milne writes, "It is said that in 1144 BE (AD 1782) Mang-ta-ra Gyi - Mindaya Gyi, better known as Bodawpaya, King of Burma - sent a Buddhist monk to Tawngpeng, to introduce Buddhism among the Palaungs. This was one of his many acts of expiation for having put to death many Buddhist monks at the beginning of his reign." However, she believes that "since the adjoining States of North Hsenwi and Mōng-mit had accepted Buddhism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that there was some knowledge of Buddhism in Tawngpeng before the missionary monk arrived." This form of Buddhism that would have been transmitted via the Shan would likely have been the Yuan form of Buddhism that is currently practised in Palaung villages of Thailand and southern Shan State. (Leslie Milne, *The Home of an Eastern Clan: A Study of Palaungs of the Shan States* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) 312.)

Yuan form of Buddhism eventually came to dominate the religious life of many Palaung communities, particularly those located near Kengtung and around the southern and eastern Shan State where many of the older Palaung people who now reside in Thailand were born. 'Yuan Buddhism', a term coined by the missionary William Clifton Dodd,⁸ refers to the type of Buddhism practised within the Tai Yuan kingdom of Lanna, which dominated the region of northern Thailand and the surrounding region between the 13th and 16th century. The kingdom was less a centralized political unit than a loose federation of semi-independent city states united through oaths of allegiance and familial ties. Chiang Mai city, founded in 1296 CE by King Mangrai (1239-1311 CE), became the centre of this rapidly expanding network and it was from this city that the cultural influence of the Tai Yuan people radiated. As Lanna reached its Golden Age (1400 to 1525 CE), its culture and political influence extended over the area of northern Thailand, northwestern Lao, the Shan State of Burma, and the Dai areas of Yunnan, China.

The spread of Lanna's cultural influence included the transmission of the Yuan form of Theravada Buddhism to the various Tai polities within its orbit. This form of Buddhism is similar to the Central Thai variety, but differs in terms of ecclesiastical organization, the pronunciation of Pali, the use of the Dhamma script, and variations in terms of the form of its rituals. While it is not known when the Yuan Buddhism of the Lanna kingdom reached Tawngpeng (the statelet of which Namhsan was the capital), the presence of religious texts written in the Dhamma script within the monasteries of present day Namhsan attest to the fact that this form of Buddhism eventually reached the Palaung dominated area, providing another stream of Buddhism from that said to have been introduced by the Burmans.

The political and cultural supremacy of Lanna lasted until the mid 16th century when a succession crisis weakened the kingdom. The Burmese invaded in 1558 and took control of Chiang Mai and most of

⁸ William Dodd, *The Tai Race* (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1923).

the Shan states, effectively ending Lanna hegemony in the region. In 1774, Siamese troops drove the Burmese out of Chiang Mai, but the state of Lanna never regained full independence, instead becoming a vassal of Bangkok. Eventually it and other northern principalities would be integrated into the emerging nation-state of Thailand, and its distinctive Tai Yuan Buddhism would be subsumed beneath the dominant Central Thai or Siamese form under the control of the national Sangha based in Bangkok. While the process of incorporation was relatively peaceful, there was resistance on behalf of some Tai Yuan monks, particularly the personage of Khruba Siwichai.

The Khruba Monk Movement

Born in Li district of Lamphun province in 1878, Khruba Siwichai (d. 1939) actively resisted the imposition of a national Sangha upon the relatively autonomous temples of northern Thailand. His mission resonated with the local people of the north and during his lifetime he attracted tens of thousands of followers to his side. Reports from this time describe the Bangkok-Chiang Mai railroad as being lined with throngs of people who came to greet him on his return from Bangkok where he was sent twice by authorities to answer charges relating to conducting ordinations without official permission, refusal to decorate his temple to celebrate the King's ascension to the throne, and rumours that he possessed supernatural powers. His resistance peaked in 1935 when a number of monks openly split with the national Sangha and declared Khruba Siwichai their leader.⁹ The crisis was averted, however, by Khruba Siwichai's signing an agreement that he would abide by the laws of the national Sangha and a tacit agreement on the Siamese side that monks in the north would be permitted to follow Yuan customs.¹⁰

⁹ Charles Keyes, "Buddhism and national integration in Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30 (1971): 15.

¹⁰ Charles Keyes, "Death of two Buddhist saints in Thailand," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Thematic Studies*, 4, 3-4 (1982): 147.

Khruba Siwichai's rise to popularity was connected with his status as a *ton bun* or 'person of merit.' A *ton bun* is an individual renowned for embodying large amounts of merit and possessing supernatural powers. Not all khruba monks are *ton bun*. The term 'khruba' was once bestowed as a sign of respect on revered elders of local temples by the local people and is still occasionally used today in this way, although the Siamese honorifics have largely displaced the traditional Yuan titles. There exists, however, a special class of 'khruba' monks within the Yuan Buddhist world whose reputation is supra-local and who are renowned for their miraculous powers. These monks are often younger than khruba monks, not thought of as *ton bun* and commonly attain their status in their early twenties, if not earlier. It is these monks who form the centre of what Kwanchewan refers to as the 'khruba monk movement'.¹¹

While khruba *ton bun* monks have a long history in northern Thailand, the 'khruba monk movement' or 'movements' really began with Khruba Siwichai. Khruba *ton bun* who came after Khruba Siwichai model their behaviour upon his actions and describe their own practices as being in the tradition laid down by him. Although the movement has shifted its strategy over time, moving away from resisting the Thai state towards accommodation and evasion, the principal focus on maintaining and reviving Yuan Buddhist traditions has remained central, from Khruba Siwichai's disciple, Khruba Khao Pi (1889 - 1977), through to contemporary khruba monks such as Khruba Bunchum Yanasangwaror (1966 - present) and Khruba Jao Theuang Natasilo (1965 - present). It is the latter of these, Khruba Jao Theuang, who has had the greatest impact upon Palaung communities of Chiang Mai province and with whom we will concern ourselves here.

¹¹ Kwanchewan Srisawat, *The Karen and the Khruba Khao Pi Movement: A Historical Study of the Response to the Transformation of in Northern Thailand*, (Unpublished MA thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1988).

Khruba Jao Theuang

Khruba Jao Theuang was born on the February 20th, 1965 in the village of Huadong in Sarapi district of Chiang Mai province, on the anniversary of Khruba Siwichai's death 26 years earlier. He was ordained as a novice at age 20, relatively late in life, at Wat Hua Dong, and underwent his full ordination rites one year later on May 25th, 1986. On March 9th, 1988 Khruba Jao Theuang left Hua Dong to become the abbot of Wat Den in Mae Taeng district of Chiang Mai province. By this time he had developed a reputation as a *ton bun*, and his followers claimed he was the reincarnation of Khruba Siwichai himself. After becoming the abbot of Wat Den, Khruba Jao Theuang began to emulate the practices of Khruba Siwichai, particularly the construction of religious monuments and the restoration of temples, beginning with the structures of Wat Den and then moving outwards across the traditional territory of the Yuan Buddhist world. It was during such a construction project, a *chedi* atop the mountain of Doi Phrabat in Chiang Dao district, that Khruba Jao Theuang came into contact with the Palaung communities of Thailand.

As practitioners of Yuan Buddhism, the Palaung people shared a view of the world that already included khruba *ton bun* such as Khruba Jao Theuang. The coming of a holy man to their territory (Doi Phrabat is located less than one kilometre from the Palaung villages of Pang Daeng Nai, Pang Daeng Nok, and Pang Daeng Klang, and within walking distance of two other villages, Huai Pong and Mae Chon) was viewed as an opportunity for making merit by helping with the construction project. Local Palaung farmers provided much of the labour for the project, building the stairway that leads up the mountain side and carrying cement and bricks up to the summit where the reliquary was being built.

Following the construction of the *chedi*, a patron-client relationship developed between Khruba Jao Theuang and Pang Daeng Nai, later evolving into a network of relationships that included most of the Palaung villages of Chiang Dao and Fang district. Khruba Jao

Theuang first sponsored the construction of a new Buddhist temple in the village of Pang Daeng Nai and invited men from the village to help with various building and renovation projects underway at his own temple in Ban Den. Most men in the village contributed some labour at this time towards the renovations, eventually transforming the run-down site into a magnificent temple grounds housing new monastic residences, a private *kuti* for Khruba Jao Theuang, a renovated *wihan* and *ubosot*, several *sala*, and meticulous landscaping. Khruba Jao Theuang also provided, and continues to provide, young boys from Pang Daeng Nai with the opportunity to ordain at Wat Den; a greatly appreciated gesture as the practice of ordaining is strictly controlled in Thailand and no Palaung temples have attained the status necessary to perform the ceremony. Five boys in total were ordained at Wat Den in the late 1990s, where they remained for five years before disrobing and returning to Pang Daeng Nai. During this time they were the only novices residing at the temple.

The relationship between Khruba Jao Theuang and the Palaung communities has developed over the years, and today most villages have received and continue to receive support from Wat Den for local temple construction projects, as well as monetary gifts to offset the cost of village festivals. Khruba Jao Theuang has also sponsored several secular projects in and around Palaung villages, including the construction of a bridge along the road to Pang Daeng Nai at a point where annual flooding makes the road practically impassable. The Palaung continue to support Khruba Jao Theuang, occasionally providing labour for the temple (i.e. during large temple festivals or when the fields owned by the temple require harvesting), as well as attending major ceremonies and festivals held at Wat Den.

While the labour provided by Palaung and other upland ethnic minority groups contributes to the success of Khruba Jao Theuang's building projects, equally important is the legitimating function their presence fulfills. For contemporary *khrua ton bun* such as Khruba Jao Theuang and Khruba Bunchum, Khruba Siwichai and the Yuan

Buddhist world he was defending stand as a model of and a model for reality.¹² Cohen goes so far as to argue that the khrua monks act as 'cosmocrators' actualizing a Buddhist holy land (*buddhadesa*) that is relatively isomorphic with the boundaries of the ex-kingdom of Lanna.¹³ This site is mapped out partially through the construction and renovation of *chedis* and temples across the geographical area the kingdom of Lanna once encompassed.¹⁴ Cohen furthermore argues that Khruba Bunchum has centred the Yuan Buddhist world upon his temple of Wat Dornreuang in Burma;¹⁵ a practice that Khruba Jao Theuang also engages in at his own temple of Wat Den.

The reconstitution of a Yuan Buddhist world centred on Wat Den and Khruba Jao Theuang can be seen most vividly in the construction of the 'Phra That Chedi 12 Rasi.' This *chedi* is a collection of 12 shrines distributed across the Yuan Buddhist world. While the pilgrimage practices associated with these shrines are no longer widely known amongst the *Khon Muang*, in the past it was considered meritorious for a person to make a pilgrimage to the shrine associated with the year of one's birth (see table 1). Such pilgrimage sites create inclusive communities across diverse geographic and social landscapes, in this case incorporating people into successively larger moral communities that radiate out from the political and cultural centre of the Ping river valley to the entire Buddhist world.¹⁶ Khruba Jao Theuang himself describes the construction of the Phra That Chedi 12 Rasi as an attempt to revive the practice of pilgrimage

¹² Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Michael Banton, ed., (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966) 8.

¹³ Paul Cohen, "Buddhism Unshackled: The Yuan 'Holy Man' tradition and the nation-state in the Tai world," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32, 20 (2001): 242.

¹⁴ Kwanchewan Buadaeng, "Khuba movements and the Karen in Northern Thailand: Negotiating sacred space and identity." Paper presented at the international workshop on *Cultural Diversity and Conservation in the Making of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China: Regional Dynamics of Past and Present* (Luang Prabang, Lao P.D.R., 24-32 February)

¹⁵ Cohen 238.

¹⁶ Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand" 85-86.

associated with these shrines. In terms of sacred geography, the *chedi* also represents an act of re-centring the Yuan Buddhist world upon Wat Den, standing as an *axis mundi* for the Yuan Buddhist world, a recreation of a dispersed sacred topography condensed within the precincts of the temple grounds.

Table 1: The Tai Yuan Twelve Sacred *Chedi*¹⁷

Animal Year	Stupa Name	Location
Rat	Phra That Chom Thong	Chom Thong District, Chiang Mai
Ox	Phra That Lampang	Kokha District, Lampang
Tiger	Phra That Cho Hae	Muang District, Phrae
Rabbit	Phra That Chae Haeng	Muang District, Nan
Dragon	Phrat That Wat Phra Sing	Muang District, Chiang Mai
Snake	Phra Chedi Bodhgaya	Bodh Gaya, India
Horse	Shwedagon	Rangoon, Burma
Goat	Phra That Doi Suthep	Muang District, Chiang Mai
Monkey	Phra That Phanom	Nakhon Phanom
Rooster	Phra That Hariphunchai	Muang District, Lamphun
Dog	Phra Ket Kaeo Culamani	Tavatimsa Heaven
Elephant	Phra That Doi Tung	Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai

¹⁷ See Charles Keyes, "Buddhist pilgrimage centres and the twelve year cycle: Northern Thai moral orders in space and time," *History of Religions*, 151 (1975): 72. Similar tables are provided in prayer books disseminated at temple festivals held at Wat Den.

As a practicing Yuan Buddhist/upland ethnic minority group, the Palaung people play a dual role in this re-imagined Yuan Buddhist world. On the one hand, their presence at events help legitimize the position of Khruba Jao Theuang himself as the continuator, if not literal embodiment, of Khruba Siwichai and his mission, as Khruba Siwichai was renowned for his ability to attract upland people to help with his projects, the most famous occasion being the time he attracted thousands of upland peoples to assist him with the construction of the road up Doi Suthep mountain. Khruba Jao Theuang clearly identifies with this aspect of Khruba Siwichai's life; every year around Visakha Bucha day, Khruba Jao Theuang makes a mimetic journey up the mountain, accompanied by hundreds of his followers (many of them Karen and Palaung dressed in the clothing of their ethnic group), to the summit where the famous *chedi* is located. While there were no Palaung people in Thailand during the life of Khruba Siwichai, the subsumption of their ethnic group under the general category of 'hill tribe' within the national and international discourse allows them to stand in as representatives of the upland followers of Khruba Siwichai and other khruba monks since his time. Their presence at festivals and ceremonies at Wat Den has a similar function; so much so that trucks are often sent to Palaung villages to transport participants to all major events held at the temple, including funerals held for prominent followers of Khruba Jao Theuang who have no connection with any of the Palaung communities.

The question of funerals raises a related point insofar as the reconstitution of a traditional Yuan Buddhist world is concerned. The participation of Palaung people in such events reflects the ritual role once played by non-Tai people in some sectors of *Khon Muang* society. Hutchinson writes about how the Lua' (Lawa) of Lanna were commonly asked to attend *Khon Muang* family occasions, such as weddings, and their presence was "of good augury".¹⁸ The ritual

¹⁸ E.W. Hutchinson, "The Lawa of Northern Siam," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 27, 2: 169.

efficacy of the Lua' people in *Khon Muang* rituals was related to their status as the autochthonous population. They were and are considered the original inhabitants of the land; a status that was once represented in royal legitimation ceremonies in *muang* such as Chiang Mai and Kengtung.¹⁹

As leaders of a cultural revitalization movement, the *khru*ba monks look to the traditional practices of Lanna as the model for their actions. Upland people once stood in a different relationship to the lowlands then they do today, and their role as the autochthonous population, rather than alien non-Tai "others-within",²⁰ is reconstituted in the ceremonies held at Wat Den. However, the Palaung differ from other groups in that they were practitioners of Yuan Buddhism long before they encountered *Khru*ba Jao Theuang. They were not converted by the charisma of *Khru*ba Jao Theuang, but represent a Buddhist population who sees a place for *khru*ba within the constellation of their own worldview

Buddhism and Distinction

The Palaung people enjoy a unique position within the context of *Khru*ba Jao Theuang's movement, one not shared by other upland ethnic minority groups, Such as the Akha or Karen. The orthopraxy of Palaung Yuan Buddhism, combined with their reputation for strictness and seriousness of practice, has created a place for the Palaung people

¹⁹ Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle Translated* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Southeast Asian Studies. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, num. 19), p. 284, fn. 45; Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2005) 51-52; Shigeharu Tanabe, "Autochthony and the Inthakhin cult in Chiang Mai," *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton, (Richmond: Curzon Press) 298.

²⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, "The Others within: Travel and ethno-spatial differentiation of Siamese subjects 1885-1910," *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Richmond: Curzon Press) 41.

within the movement as exemplary Buddhists. Speeches by Khruba Jao Theuang frequently chide the *Khon Muang* people for abandoning their old traditions in favour of Central Thai forms of practice and not being serious about their Buddhism; behaviour that is contrasted with that of the Palaungs. Palaung monks are similarly praised for their ability to recite Pali chants without the aid of the pronunciation guides that must be distributed to visiting Northern and Central Thai monks, as Khruba Jao Theuang encourages attendees at his ceremonies to pronounce Pali in what he considers its more authentic form, as performed in Burma.

Khruba Jao Theuang similarly encourages Palaung people to maintain their own way of conducting Buddhist rituals in the face of pressure from visiting monks who encourage them to adopt Central Thai forms of practice. As an upland people, monks from the *Thammacarik*²¹ program and social workers frequently spend time in Palaung villages to instruct them on proper practice. One of the directors of Wat Srisoda, the regional headquarters of the *Thammacarik* program, expressed similar sentiments during an interview, explaining Palaung religion as a “mix of ancestor worship and Buddhism,” and implying that it is in need of correction. It is also common to hear *Khon Muang* people describe Palaung religion as “hill tribe Buddhism” (*sasana phut chao khao*), a label meant to discredit the authenticity of their Buddhism in relation to their own practice.

Suggestions to change their practices, however, are largely ignored by the various Palaung communities. While much of the resistance is no doubt rooted in the strong identity Palaung people have with their own religious traditions, the support received from Khruba Jao Theuang, a man many Palaung view as a major religious

²¹ The *Thammacarik* program (lit. ‘wandering Dharma’) began in the 1960s as part of a government effort to spread Thai nationalism to the upland people by converting them to Buddhism. See Keyes, “Buddhism and national integration in Thailand” 562-567.

authority figure, helps provide external justifications for continuing local Yuan Buddhist traditions in the face of pressure to emulate the Central Thai form of practice. Ceremonies are still conducted according to the dictates of older Tai Yuan style guides and Pali chanting reflects a close similarity to the way it is performed in Burma, a style Khruba Jao Theuang says is closer to the traditional Lanna style of chanting. The Dhamma script, once used to write the religious literature of the Yuan Buddhist world, continues to be used in Palaung villages to write both Tai Yuan and Palaung language texts, with Central Thai playing only a minor role, often in the form of *anisong*, or blessing texts, recited on special occasions (i.e. Songkran and Khao Pansa).

The preservation of Yuan Buddhism in the Palaung village of Pang Daeng Nai serves as a means to distinguish Palaung religious practices from those of the lowland *Khon Muang* people from whom they originally derived. As the village leader of Pang Daeng Nai, a Palaung man in his late 70s, explains, "In the lowlands they do not remember the old ways, the true ways. They have changed their practices over time. When people come here and see us doing this ritual or that one, they wonder why it is so different. We tell them this is the ancient way." The local lay Buddhist specialist (Palaung *dajaan*), a man in his late 60s, similarly notes, "The religion of the *Khon Muang* people has developed over time, it is not the same, it has changed in little ways over time, and is no longer the same as the Buddhism here in the village. Our Buddhism is the same as it was in ancient times."

Yuan Buddhism as it is practiced in Palaung villages is considered more authentic than that which is performed in the *Khon Muang* temples; an authenticity that derives in part from the perception that it is older than the practices of the Central Thai. This perception is supported by Khruba Jao Theuang, who preaches the authenticity of the Yuan Buddhist practices to Palaung and *Khon Muang* alike. Palaung practitioners, particularly older members of the community who are more involved in religious matters, thus celebrate

their own practice as something distinct from that of the lowland *Khong Muang*. While the shared religious tradition of Theravada Buddhism provides significant cross-cultural connections between Palaung and the larger Thai community, the particular tradition Yuan Buddhism, with its accompanying imagined community coalescing around contemporary khruba monks, provides an alternative form of imagining ethnic and religious identity that reinforces a sense of distinct group identity in the face of the dominant Thai culture.

Conclusion

Under Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1957-1963), Buddhism was used to promote Thai nationalism in the remote regions of Thailand. During this period, the *Thammacarik* program sent monks from the urban temples out to 'hill tribe' villages to convert them to Buddhism in the hope that this would integrate these communities into the national body of Thailand. The program continues today, with hundreds of 'hill tribe' novice monks enrolled at the teaching temple of Wat Srisoda, which also serves as the regional headquarters for the *Thammacarik* program in the north. The missionary goal of the project remains the same; integration of upland people into Thai society through their conversion to Buddhism.

Buddhism can serve as a means through which people from diverse cultural backgrounds can communicate and find common ground, and the educational opportunities provided by monasteries can help young upland boys become more socially mobile within the economy of contemporary Thailand, integrating themselves more fully into the national community. However, it is important to recognize that Buddhism can also serve as the basis for drawing distinctions between groups, particularly when the Buddhist practices are localized and take place within relatively discrete social spaces, such as in the case of ethnic groups. This process of drawing distinctions is important to keep in mind as an increasingly large number of upland ethnic minority groups convert to the Buddhist faith. While this view

does not deny the important role Buddhism can serve in bridging the divide between upland and lowland cultures, it does suggest that scholars need to be cautious about viewing the spread of Buddhism amongst upland peoples as a process of 'becoming Tai'.

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