

Persistence and Transmission of Monness in Funeral Rites: A Case Study of Mons at Ko Kret¹

Chayanut Intudom²

Abstract

Ko Kret, a Mon community in Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province, in the central part of Thailand, at present has been very much exposed to tourism. The community receives a great number of visitors both Thais and foreigners, particularly on the weekends. From this aspect, it might be assumed that the ethnic Mon people at Ko Kret would have been completely absorbed by their host society, and Monness may have long vanished.

As a result of my research, it is evident that Monness can still be identified through Mon beliefs and rituals, which can be seen by the Mon funeral rites described in this article. Much of these rites still followed the old traditions, and Monness can still be traced through the practices, beliefs and ritual objects. The analysis of Mon funeral rites reveals the persistence of Monness seen particularly, in the case of funerals for monks, in the making and the style of coffins, pyres and fireworks; and in the case of laymen, in beds, personal belongings of the dead, and the path and the gate for the dead.

¹ This article is based on the author's MA thesis entitled "Persistence and Transmission of Monness in Beliefs and Rituals: A Case Study of Mons at Ko Kret, Changwat Nonthaburi."

² MA student (Thai Studies), Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Introduction

The Mon people migrated to Thailand after their last capital, Hongsawaddy, in the territory of present day Myanmar, was completely destroyed by the Burmese in 1757, ten years before the fall of Ayutthaya. Historical evidence indicates that the Mon were prosperous and culturally civilized in almost every aspect, particularly in Theravada Buddhism. They have had their own language and script since the 5th century.³ Even the Burmese, when they built their nation, adopted the Mon language and culture. The two opponents engaged in wars against each other repeatedly. Finally, the Mon Kingdom was completely defeated by King Alaungpaya (1752-1760) of the Kongbaung dynasty, and only its name remained. Mon was annexed as part of Burma since then. Being cruelly treated, they

In fact, the Mon people started migrating to Thailand since the mid-Ayutthaya period in the reign of King Mahathammaraja (1569-1590). After that, there were several more flights up until the Thonburi and early Rattanakosin periods. Some of the Mon people were granted permission from the Thai kings to live in the areas along the western border, which at present are areas in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi provinces. Their duty was to watch the border and spy on the Burmese army. They belonged to the official unit called Krom Atthamat [กรมอาทมาต].⁴ A great number of them were led to live in other areas, such as Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Bangkok, Samut Sakhon, and Samut Prakan. Normally, their settlements were located along the rivers or canals. They practiced their beliefs freely and gradually adjusted to the new environment.

The Mons were welcomed in Thailand and could co-exist well with the host society. They once again had the opportunity to enjoy freedom. They took different careers: farmers, rice growers, potters, traders, officials, soldiers. Many served the royal court and became high-ranking officials. Several Mon ladies entered the royal court to be royal consorts or married some members of the royal family or high-ranking officials, making their families influential.

³ Guillon, *The Mons: A Civilization of Southeast Asia*, 19, 31.

⁴ Suporn Ocharoen, "The Mons in Thailand", 111.

Being once a highly civilized nation, the Mon have been culturally influential over Thailand in various respects, such as religion, language, art, traditions, law, music, and dance. It can be estimated that the Mons have lived in Thailand no less than 350 years. At present, their descendants are of Thai nationality by law and are often called Thai-Raman. Judging from the long period of their settlements, they should have been completely assimilated. However, it has been shown that many communities still maintain their old traditions, in which Monness can be identified.

Looking at the Mon traditions practiced today, three main factors can be identified which determine Monness: **Buddhism, animistic beliefs and the social value of being grateful.** In this article, I will discuss the persistence of Monness presented in Mon rituals, particularly, Mon funeral rites.

Background of Mons at Ko Kret

One among the Mon communities in Thailand is Ko Kret,⁵ an island in the Chao Phraya River and a sub-district belonging to Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province. At present, there are seven villages on Ko Kret, three of which are Mon villages. Each village has a temple according to Mon tradition. The most important temple is Wat Paramaiyikavas which is well-known to the Mon people around Amphoe Pak Kret and beyond. Monks at this temple still chant in Mon styled Pali. Their ancestors migrated to Thailand from the kingdom's important port of Martaban in the Thonburi period around 1774, and were granted permission by King Taksin to live in Pak Kret. At present, some people can still speak Mon.

The people practice Buddhism and very much enjoy making merit, which is one of the most prominent characteristics of the Mons. Buddhist rites are held all year round. In the past, they even stopped working, many days on some occasions, for merit making.

⁵ *Ko* [เกาะ] is a Thai word for an island.

Despite being religious Buddhists, they still carry on ancient animistic beliefs, some of which are quite prominent. For example, they believe in the guardian spirits of the village. At Ko Kret, the most respected village guardian spirit is Chao Pho Noom of Village 1 or Ban Lat Kret. There are no figures or representation of Chao Pho Noom, but the villagers believe in his existence. Every year in April, the feast for Chao Pho Noom is held at his shrine, followed by a séance dance. This is to appease the spirit, to express their gratitude and offer thanks for his protection. The people who attend the rite are both from Ko Kret and elsewhere. In addition, they believe that each Mon temple has a guardian spirit. The spirit is called *Tala Than* [ตะละทาน] and is well respected by both monks and people.

Clan and ancestral spirits are also highly respected. Traditionally, the spirits of a clan are inherited through the first son of a family. Their clothes or other belongings are kept on a shelf or box and the rites to worship them must be performed properly. Ancestral spirits are believed to protect the house and the family members. They must not do anything that may offend them. Some house rules are to be followed. For example, they must not accept any outsider to stay overnight at their house without informing the spirits; or when they buy a whole chicken to eat, they must offer it to the spirits first before taking it to cook. If the spirits are offended, some bad luck may occur in the family. Furthermore, they have other spirits that must be honored, such as kiln spirits, boat spirits, and tree spirits. The fact that they still strongly carry on the animistic belief also indicates an aspect of Monness.

Traditionally, Mons do not erect a shrine of the land spirit, or Phra Phum shrine, in their houses. The reason may be because they already have guardian spirits of the villages and ancestral spirits. However, now Phra Phum shrines can be seen. They might have adopted the cult of Phra Phum from the Thais after living in the Thai environment for some time. However, some families at Ko Kret still maintain the old custom and do not have a Phra Phum shrine in their house.

In connection with rites of passage – birth, adulthood, marriage, sickness – the practices are largely adapted in accordance with social changes. The tradition concerning death is the most interesting as they are impressively practiced in the old way. In Mon funeral rites, Monness is reflected through the practices, some particular objects they use, and ancient animistic beliefs.

Mon Rites of Passage in Present Day Ko Kret

Mon rites of passage in present day Ko Kret have transformed with time and drastic changes of the society because of rapid development and technological progress.

Birth

In the old Mon custom practiced in the past, any woman in pregnancy had to put a coconut at the top of her bed, which would be left there until the day she gave birth.⁶ The Mons at Ko Kret used a coconut, but it would be placed near the spot the baby slept and left there until its young leaves sprouted, after which the parents would grow it.⁷

Traditionally, the delivery of a baby was taken care of by a village midwife. Later, when health care and transportation improved, pregnant women have nothing to do with coconuts and midwives. They all go to hospitals to receive proper medical care from modern doctors. Traditional birth and midwives have become antiquated and no longer exist.

⁶ Juan Kruevichyarn, *Significant Mon Traditions*, 34.

⁷ Interview with Mr. Thonghor Ngiew-ok.

Adulthood

Mon children in the past were often seen wearing top-knots or braids. This tradition, although less popular, can still be seen in present day Ko Kret. It is believed that wearing a top-knot makes them healthy and they will not be disturbed by some stray spirits. Before, the cutting of the top-knot ceremony, signifying the end of childhood and starting to become youths, would be conducted when the children were about nine years old. Now, it depends on the parents' decision.

Traditionally, parents would send their sons to serve the monks at the temples. Most boys first received monastic education. Some practiced Mon art with skilled monks. The girls helped their parents with housework as Thai girls. At present, Mon boys and girls go to schools similar to other Thai children.

For the sons, they have one important duty to perform when they are grown, that is, to ordain to be a monk. This is considered a great deed every son should do to express gratitude to his parents. In so doing, the parents will gain great merit. The ordination ceremony of the Mons at Ko Kret is not much different from the Thais, although before the ordination ceremony, one who is going to be ordained will have to worship the village guardian spirit and also the guardian spirit of the temple.

Marriage

Wedding ceremonies of the Mons at Ko Kret, in the past and at present, have some differences. For example, in the past, monks would not be invited to be present at a wedding ceremony because it was considered to be a laymen's concern. Nowadays, the Mons practice as the Thais. Monks are invited as they see it as auspicious for the wedding couple. However, although things have changed, some traditional elements are still preserved, i.e., a wedding ceremony cannot be held if there is a death in the family.

Sickness

Nowadays, when the people get sick, they go for medical service at hospitals and do not rely on traditional healers or traditional medicine as in the past. However, some still go to monks for sacred water, auspicious threads and amulets in the belief that these objects can protect them and cure sickness. Monks may cast spells on them or chant for them. Some still perform a rite to feed the spirits when their children do not feel well or cry a lot from unknown causes, believing that the children are disturbed by some spirits. The rite is called *tho-a-naem* [เพาะอะแนม]. To perform the rite, they place some food on a leaf or any container and leave it at a spot on a road side or a forked road. The account given explains that beliefs in magic and spirits still remain even in the era of technology.

Death

For the Mons at Ko Kret, the matter of death seems to be very significant. Looking into the details, it can be seen that this reflects their religious faith, the belief in life after death and rebirth, as well as animistic and superstitious beliefs. Mon funeral rites also reflect a social value of gratitude, particularly when the dead are parents, senior family members and senior monks. Mon funeral rites contain didactic purposes for the living to examine themselves. Didactic messages are also conveyed by the dead. Death expresses the soul of Mons.

Funeral Rites of Mons at Ko Kret

In the context of death, preparation of the bodies and funeral rites are carried out on the foundation of the old texts *Lokasamutti*, *Anisamsa Kammathan* and *Kala Kali*. For example, the body of one who dies outside the house will not be brought back to the house, but right to the temple. Also, one who dies of any unusual cause, such as accidents, being murdered, suicide, drowning, being bitten by a snake, or from some sickness, such as leprosy, psychosis, cholera, must be buried as soon as possible with no religious rites. The details are extensive. In the past, the Mons in Ko Kret followed the directions quite strictly. In modern times, their practice has been more relaxed.

They now will hold religious rights for one up to three days for ones who from an unusual death, then the body is cremated. This seems to have been adopted from the Thais. This is also because of the fact that burying is no longer possible as the community has become crowded and there is no space left for this purpose.

The way to cleanse the body is believed to be of Indian influence. The body is bathed with two waters. First, warm water mixed with curcuma is used. The body will be cleaned neatly with soap, and the hair washed. In the last step, pure water is poured over the whole body. The traditional way to put clothes on the dead was to reverse the front to the back. Now they dress the dead in the usual way. In the past, during bathing, waste inside the body would be excreted by way of pressing hard on the stomach in order to delay the body's decomposition. In modern days, the body is injected with chemicals.

The dead can be kept both at home or at a temple. In the Mon community at Ko Kret, the religious rites for the dead occupy one to five days. After the cremation, there still is a series of rites to follow.

In Mon tradition, funerals held for monks and laymen are remarkably different, from which Monness can be identified. The funeral rites for monks and laymen will be explained separately.

Monness in Funeral Rites of Mon Monks

The Mon people are quite religious and very much respect monks. It can be said that monks are the real leaders of the communities. They no longer have their country and monarchs, so monks are regarded as their highest institution. When monks pass away, particularly those with age, rank and virtue, funerals of exquisite grandeur will be held for them. Particularly, in Mon custom, cremation ceremonies for monks are the moment to rejoice since they are bound to return to heaven. Therefore, the people come in colored cloth. There are also a lot of celebrations in the temple grounds. This is unique for the Mon people.

Mons at Ko Kret have carried on the custom and beliefs mentioned above regarding the funeral rites of monks. In addition, in the funerals of the venerable and high-ranking monks, certain prominent objects will be seen, all of which signify Monness.



Figure 1: *Long hem*.

(Photo Courtesy of Wat Paramaiyikavas)

Long Hem

Long hem [โลงเหม] is a Mon traditional coffin with a cover decorated with spires (Figure 1). Mons in Phra Pradaeng call it *ala bok* [อะลาบ็อก]. Mons in Pathum Thani call it *hem kao wun* [เหมกาวุ่น]. The shape of the coffin is narrow at the lower part and wider at the upper part, with a cover decorated with spires. The shape is not easy to make. Mon artisans have their own technique and it takes time. The coffin is intricately decorated with hundreds of pieces of gold paper perforated into Mon patterns. This kind of decoration is Mon art transmitted since their old days in Martaban. The front side of the coffin has small windows through which the body can be seen. It is real Mon artistic work that needs skilled artisans.

This coffin is made only when there an important monk who dies, and will not be prepared in advance. When an important monk dies, his body, after cleansing, will be kept at a suitable place for the villagers to come and pay homage, and the body will be put in the coffin

after its completion. It is quite expensive to make this kind of coffin, and at the end it will be burnt with the body. At present, the artisans who have the ability to make this kind of coffin are very few. There is only one left now in the Mon community at Ko Kret. Since high-ranking Mon monks nowadays have the right to request a coffin from the palace, the opportunity to see *long hem* may become quite infrequent.



Figure 2: Mon Funeral *Prasat*.
(Photo Courtesy of Wat Paramaiyikavas)

Prasat

Prasat [ปราสาท] is a traditional pyre temporarily erected as a crematorium of a dead Mon monk, particularly one who is of age, rank and virtue (Figure 2). The use of a *prasat* reflects the Mons' traditional concept about monks. For the Mons, monks are considered pure because they carry on the Buddha's teachings and the Buddhist religion. They observe hundreds of precepts and teach people, so it is considered inappropriate to cremate their remains at crematoriums

used by people. A *prasat* is a construction decorated with one to nine spires, depending on the age, rank and virtue of the monk. The construction is costly, but there will also be some support from other Thai and Mon communities. The work is complex and may take months to complete. By the time the pyre is finished, the body will be already dried and then the cremation ceremony can be held. The coffin will be placed on this temporary pyre on the cremation day. Normally, in Mon tradition, the cremation ceremonies of monks are held in the hot season.

There is a lot of work to be done, including planning, designing, gathering skilled artisans, carpenters and man power, and making decorations. The *prasat* is adorned with thousands of pieces of perforated gold paper and many carvings. The mythical bird *hassadeeling* will also be seen as decorations because of the old belief that such a bird is mighty and is able to bring the soul of the dead monk back to heaven. The villagers will come to lend their hands in all kinds of work. It is the belief that they will gain a lot of merit lending their helping hands in monk's funerals.



Figure 3: *Luknu*, Mon Fireworks.

Luknu

In old Mon tradition, it is considered improper to cremate the remains of monks by hand. What they used in the old times were some kinds of fireworks called *luknu* [ลูกหนู] (Figure 3).⁸ The Mons call *luknu* differently in different areas, for example, *pia ta ha noi* [เปี้ยะตะฮะนอย] or *kao pia ta ha noi* [กาเปี้ยะตะฮะนอย].⁹ The Mons at Ko Kret call it *ha noi* [ฮะนอย]. Since it is difficult to properly define in English, in this article, I will refer to *luknu* as Mon fireworks.

Mon fireworks are believed to have been developed from weapons used to be shot at the Burmese camps in ancient times.¹⁰ In the past, they were made from large bamboo. At present, the people use strong wood, such as mango wood. The length may be 80 centimetres up to 1.20 metres. A hole is pierced in the middle, along its length, and some explosive substances are put inside. The fireworks portray Mon wisdom as the makers must know how and the amounts to mix.

⁸ *Luknu* [ลูกหนู] is a Thai word meaning a mouse.

⁹ Chativat Ngamniyom, *Firing Luknu*, 9.

¹⁰ Chativat Ngamniyom, *Firing Luknu*, 1.

The time when Mon fireworks were still in use, the people would shoot several of them at the coffin to help cremate the body. They would explode and caused fire. The concept has a connection with the Buddha's cremation ceremony in which the fire occurred without anybody lighting it.

At present, Mon fireworks are no longer used for this purpose because of the crowded community and the limited space. Another reason is that they may cause an undesirable scene: a broken coffin, with the body and the bones on the ground. But the people still make and carry them in processions around the pyre to express their respect and gratitude to the dead monk, after which they will be shot in a joyful contest in the open with the model of the pyre as the target. Mon fireworks are not only used in monk's cremation ceremonies, but also in some celebrations.

All these three objects still persist in the present day Mon community at Ko Kret and other Mon communities in Thailand, although they may only be seen once in a long while. They reflect the Mon people's way of belief in connection with Buddhist religion and their relationship with monks.

Monness in Funeral Rites of Mon Laymen

In the case of a family member who dies of usual causes at home, such as old age or illness, the body can be kept at the home. Since this is a domestic ceremony, there are some particular objects to consider. Importantly, a large part of the funeral rites of laymen contains religious meanings in order to encourage the living to lead their lives wisely following the Buddha's teaching.



Figure 4: *Chong ne*.

Chong ne

Chong ne [จงเนะ, จงเนียะ] is a Mon word for a bed especially made for the dead to be placed on (Figure 4). The reason *chong ne* is made is probably because, traditionally, the Mons do not take a coffin inside the house as it is considered inauspicious. The meaning of *chong ne* is to be a bed of victory. Caskets are used if the funeral rites are held at temples.

In principle, a *chong ne* is a low wooden bed with six posts, with the top covered with a canopy of white cloth placed on 20 pieces of wood. Every part of the bed contains religious meaning for didactic purposes. For example, the six posts represent the Six Classes of Objects or Six Arammanas which should be abstained from in order to reach the Six Heavens. According to the Dr. Sued Gajaseni, a descendant of Phraya Jeng the Mon leader in Thonburi period, the bed is to encourage the dead to overcome the 31 Planes of Existence.¹¹ There are many details about the number of pieces of wood to be used and the hidden meanings, such concepts which do not exist in Thai funerals.

¹¹ Sued Gajaseni, "Culture and Traditions", 65.

In the past, the bed would have been made of bamboo. However, since bamboo is rarer now, the people use wood instead. Some use wood from the bed once owned by the dead. Although now they are not as strict about the number of pieces of wood, it must have six posts. In addition, in the past, the body was uncovered, exposed to the eyes of the guests. Thus, they would see every step of the decomposition and realize the impermanence of life and the way they should lead their lives. This is similar to meditating by looking at a corpse or *asubhakammathan*. Nowadays, the dead are injected with chemicals to delay the composition and covered. However, the guests can still get some didactic meaning from the scene.

The bed will be dismantled and disposed of as soon as the body is carried away. The wood will not be reused. However, if it is still in good condition, the wood can be offered to a temple. The people now have almost forgotten the meanings of each part, but they still know the bed contains some religious meaning.



Figure 5: Betel Nut Cutter and Ring

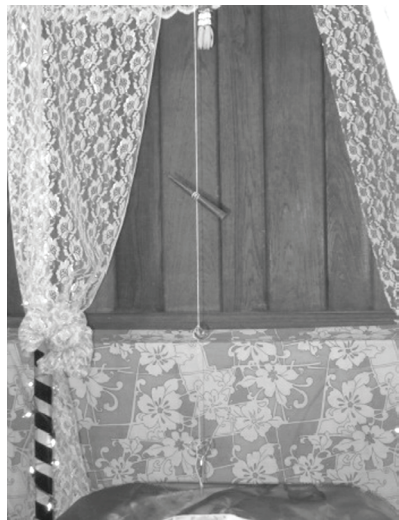


Figure 6: Betel Nut Cutter and Ring

The Ring and Betel Nut Cutter

The ring and betel nut cutter are the personal belongings of the dead (Figures 5 and 6). Betel nut cutters were necessary and considered important personal belongings at the time the old tradition of betel chewing was in fashion. In modern times, betel chewing has become out of fashion, but a betel nut cutter has still been kept as part of the tradition. The two objects have their part in the funeral rites.

The two objects will be tied and hung down to a position above the dead person's stomach. The cutter is at the lowest point. Above it are the ring and a betel nut which, in some cases, is kept inside a banana cone. As at present betel nut cutters are rare, a small pair of normal scissors is often used instead. The ring, the betel nut cutter and the chewing betel each have their own meaning. The ring is said to represent *cakkhuyāna* or understanding/wisdom, and the betel nut cutter is as if a tool used to destroy all kinds of *kilesa* or defilements.¹² The ring is also interpreted by some people to represent *samsara*. The betel nut is as if to warn the people to get rid of *kilesa* since they cannot take anything with them when they die. Even a betel nut which is within reach, they cannot eat.

Hanging a betel nut cutter was of some use in the past. When the distance between it and the stomach got very close, this indicated the time the body should be taken to the pyre.

Poeng hamao (The Basket of the Soul)

According to Dr. Sued, *poeng hamao* [เปิงฮะมาว] is *krabung winyan* [กระบุงวินยาน] in Thai,¹³ which can roughly be translated as 'the basket of the soul' in English (Figure 7). *Poeng hamao* is a bamboo basket containing the dead person's personal belongings, such as clothes, shoes, sandals, and glasses. Now containers made of metal are used in place of bamboo.

Phra Sumetmuni, the abbot of Wat Paramaiyikavas at Ko Kret, describes *poeng hamao* differently. According to him, *poeng hamao*

¹² Sued Gajaseni, "Culture and Traditions", 65.

¹³ Sued Gajaseni, "Culture and Traditions", 66.

includes a clay pot, three rice balls mixed with sugar, which in the (Figure 8). The pot is put in a bowl on three rocks, and there must be a rattan holder. In the past, they also cooked rice for the dead using this pot, in addition to the rice balls. In this context, the meaning of *poeng hamao* is rice of the dead. This is also the perception of the people at Ko Kret. According to the text *Kala Kali*, the pot represents the fragility of *sankhara*, and the three rocks represent three planes of existence: *kamabhava*, *rupabhava* and *arupabhava*.



Figure 7: *Poeng hamao*.



Figure 8: *Poeng hamao*.

These days, normal food cooked for the guests is offered to the dead. But traditional preparation is still maintained, i.e., they still place *poeng hamao* alongside the dead. The people also put rice grains and dried food, such as chili, garlic, onions, and salt, in the pot, although no one can give the answer when this began. Preparation of rice balls seems to be very old and rarely seen, yet it still exists and is seen once in a while. Preparations such as this are found in the funeral rites both at home and temple.



Figure 9: Lamp, water and coconut.

A lamp, water and coconut are mentioned in the old books (Figure 9). In the case of a lamp, perhaps it is as if to provide light for the dead, to let them go with light, not with darkness. In the past, the lamp had to be lit all the time. Now, for fear of fire, the people put it out at night after the chants are finished and light it again in the morning, until the day the body is taken to be cremated. In Mon funerals, light seems to be very important to the dead. Even in daytime the lamp must be lit.

Water for the dead must also be prepared and one must take care not to let it dry out. Water from coconuts is considered as pure as the mind of an *arahant* so it is fit for washing the face of the dead before cremating.



Figure 10: *Pratu Pa*.

The Path and the Gate for the Dead

In Mon way, it is noticeable that things used for the dead are different from those used by the living; accordingly, in Mon tradition, the dead cannot be taken through the house door used by the living. To take the body out of the house, a special gate must be made. In the old times, one side of the house walls had to be removed to make a path for the dead. In addition, there had to be another ladder for the dead too. Removing the wall was possible in the past since most houses were not very big and material used in building was not strong. To avoid tearing off the wall, there is an alternative, which is to make a special gate by attaching coconut fronds or other plants to the house door (Figure 10). This is called, in Thai, *pratu pa* [ประตูผี]. These coconut fronds will be torn off and thrown away as soon as the body is taken through. This tradition is still practiced in the Mon villages in Ko Kret, and can be found at Klong Glua sub-district, another Mon settlement in Pak Kret.



Figure 11: Washing the coffin.



Figure 12: Breaking the clay pot.

As mentioned before, Mon people will never take a coffin inside their house. The coffin will be placed at the exterior of the house and the body will be carried out to it. Before that, the coffin will be washed with mixture of water and turmeric and then pure water from clay pots (Figure 11), after which the clay pots must be broken by throwing them on the floor to prevent their reuse (Figure 12). Some people say it signifies the end of the four elements. As soon as the coffin with the body is carried out, rice grains will be sprinkled around the house. This is said to prevent the return of the dead and so that the dead will go without worries.

In the Mon community at Ko Kret, they will not carry the dead pass the houses, so boats are often used as means to take the dead to the temple. Before the coffin is loaded into the boat, someone must conduct a ritual to ask permission from the female boat spirit, or *pakaeng kloeng* [ปะแก้งเกลิง], using incense sticks, flowers and a piece of cloth as offerings. This reflects their old animistic belief.

The Mon traditional preparation explained above is very rare to be seen in these days, but it still exists. In some cases, Mon performing arts such as Mon ensembles *pi phat mon* [ปีพาทย์มอญ] and old Mon dance *mon ram* [มอญรำ] will be performed as a tribute to the dead. These are also components indicating Monness.

After the cremation, a series of rituals are conducted to dedicate merit to the dead. The religious rite on the seventh day is considered very important. The monks are offered food in the morning, followed by offering them one or two Buddha images, along with a large number of necessary things of daily use. In the rite, there will be a long speech by a monk and water is poured on the items by people in the act of dedication. In this rite, food will also be prepared to offer to the dead and other spirits as well. The way of preparation is to put many kinds of food in a container made of a banana leaf, which will be placed at a forked road at the end of the rite. The Mon people at Ko Kret do not hold a merit-making ceremony on the 50th or 100th day as the Thais do because it is not their custom.¹⁴

Another interesting ritual is *tho ayong kyat* [เพาะอะยงกยาจ], also on the seventh day, which is a rite to offer an image of the Buddha to monks. The rite is to remember the day the Buddha attained enlightenment and was regularly practiced in the old days. In these days it is rare to be seen. The people tend to omit it because it is very complicated in terms of the practices and ritual objects needed.



Figure 13: Items to inter the ashes.

¹⁴ Merit-making on the 100th day came into being in the reign of King Chulalongkorn in the royal funeral of Queen Sunanda.

After the cremation ceremony, there is the rite to inter the remains. Some follow the old tradition of burying them in the vicinity of a *bo* tree in the grounds of a temple. Some inter them in a niche prepared by a temple. This indicates the Mon people's strong faith in the Buddhist religion. They wish to be in the shade of the religion, either dead or alive. In the rite to inter the remains, a most interesting object is a small 4-stepped wooden ladder which is used as the means for the dead to reach the resting place (Figure 13).

According to the old tradition, the Mons at Ko Kret neither kept the remains at home, nor threw them in the water. If they are unable to set the appropriate date to inter the remains, they will leave them in the care of a temple.

Factors Determining the Transmission of Monness in Funeral Rites

The continuity of such traditional practices may be the result of the belief that the dead will gain a great deal of merit if the funeral rites are held in accordance with the old tradition, as done by their ancestors in the old times. The fact that there still are knowledgeable leaders and artisans left in the community also contributes to the transmission of Mon funeral tradition. The knowledgeable leaders can be both monks and laymen who are used to and can memorize the practices and the preparation of any rite, not only the funeral rites. The present abbot of Wat Paramaiyikavas often reminds the villagers of their race by transferring knowledge about Mon to them when they gather at the temple for any religious activity. He also often reiterates that they should help preserve Mon culture since the existence of Mon culture means the existence of Mons, although at present they have no country. The artisans are, for example, the Mon coffins or *long hem* makers, the temporary pyres or *prasat* makers, and the *chong ne* makers. All of them play an important role in transmitting Mon tradition. Without them, transmission cannot be possible.

The villagers also are an important part. It is noteworthy that the villagers both old and young are willing to participate and lend their hand in any traditional activities. This shows the strength of the community which contributes much to the existence and transmission

of Monness. Another factor may lie in the fact that they still have ethnic consciousness that allows them to express their identity naturally through the beliefs and rituals. Regarding the traditional funeral rites of Mon monks, it is possible that they may be less practiced in the future since the capable artisans, particularly in making Mon coffins and temporary pyres, are less and less in the community at Ko Kret.

Concluding Remarks

With respect to rituals of death, the details are quite extensive in the Mon tradition. Having lived in the Thai environment for a long time, it is not uncommon that there should have been adoption, adaptation or transformation of some elements. However, much of the old tradition has been maintained. Mon funeral rites reveal some traditional concepts, beliefs and didactic messages consisting of many religious elements in parallel with spiritual components. These two components can be said to be the outstanding behavior of Mons. In addition, the funeral-related rites symbolize the feelings of love, good wishes and gratitude of the living towards the dead. Their strong faith in Buddhism is unquestionable. The funerals also show the strength and unity of the community since the people will come to take part in anything they can do, especially at a monk's funeral. The particular objects used in the rites, the concepts, practices, traditions and beliefs are distinguishable and prove the continued existence of Monness. They also prove that ethnic consciousness still remains despite the fact that their ancestors first came to Thailand more than 300 years ago.

References

Thai

- Sued Gajaseni [สุเอ็ด กชเสนี], Professor Emeritus Doctor. “วัฒนธรรมประเพณีมอญ (Mon Culture and Traditions).” *In Commemoration Volume for the Cremation of Professor Emeritus Doctor Sued Gajaseni*. Bangkok: Tech Promotion and Advertising, 2008.

- Juan Kruevichyajarn [จวน เครือวิชฌยาจารย์]. ประเพณีมอญที่สำคัญ
(*Significant Mon Traditions*). Bangkok: Pikhansesh Printing
Centre, 2000.
- Chativat Ngamniyom [ชาติวัฒน์ งามนิยม], Lieutenant General. การจุด
ลูกหนู (ดอกไม้เพลิงของชาวไทย – รามัญ) (*Firing Luknu (Fireworks
of Thai – Mon)*). N.p., n.d.
- Suporn Ocharoen [สุภรณ์ โอเจริญ]. “ชาวมอญในประเทศไทย: วิเคราะห์ฐานะ
และบทบาทในสังคมไทยตั้งแต่สมัยอยุธยาตอนกลางถึงสมัยรัตนโกสินทร์
ตอนต้น (The Mons in Thailand: An analysis of Their Status
and Role in Thai Society from the Mid Ayudhya to the Early
Rattanakosin Period).” Master Thesis, Department of History
Faculty of Arts Chulalongkorn University, 1976.
- Charoon Yanacharee [พระมหาจรัญ ญาณจารี], Phra Maha. “คัมภีร์กาละกาฬี
[Khamphi Kala Kali].” *Phra Khru Udom Thammasakhon*.
Commemoration Volume for the Cremation Ceremony of
Phra Khru Udom Thammasakhon, the Former Abbot of Wat
Bangkrachao, on 16 April 2006.

English

- Guillon, Emmanuel. *The Mons: A Civilization of Southeast Asia*.
Trans. and Ed. James V. Di Crocco. Bangkok: The Siam
Society, 1999.