

Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual: The Reproduction of a Northern Thai Ritual in Central Thailand¹

Watcharaporn Distapan²

Abstract

Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual or the almsgiving ritual on full-moon Wednesday is a persistent tradition in northern Thailand. This ritual is practiced only on full-moon Wednesday because northern Thais believe that Phra Upakhut, a disciple of the Buddha who has magical powers, will leave the bottom of the sea where he resides and come to the world to collect his alms only on that day. There are stories about people who give alms to Phra Upakhut on the special day and are blessed with wealth in return. Therefore, giving alms to the monks on full-moon Wednesday has become a popular ritual among northern Thais.

Since 2009, Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual has also been found in other areas outside the north, such as Prachuap Khiri Khan Province and Nonthaburi Province in

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² PhD Candidate, Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University; Lecturer, Department of Thai, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University.

central Thailand. This article will then focus on studying the reproduction of this ritual in central Thailand, examining how patterns and details of the ritual vary from the ones originally practiced in the north. When this ritual is reproduced in the new areas, some patterns and details are changed in accordance with central Thai culture. Consequently, Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan and Nonthaburi is different from the original ritual practiced in the north. For example, in Prachuap Khiri Khan, the time of the ritual is changed from midnight to early morning. Also, the ordination of novices and their roles in alms collection are added to the ritual when it is held in Nonthaburi.

The phenomenon of the reproduction of Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand indicates how the socio-cultural context of central Thailand determines the kinds of change in the borrowed northern Thai ritual. In addition, this article will discuss how the contemporary context of tourism and capitalism affects Thai folklore and tradition in the midst of changing Thai society.

Introduction

Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual, or the midnight almsgiving ritual, is a persistent tradition in northern Thailand. Northern Thais call this ritual “Takbat Pengpud [ตักบาตรเพ็งปู้ด]” (the almsgiving ritual on full-moon Wednesday) because it is based on the belief that the arhat, Phra Upakhut, will leave his dwelling at the bottom of the sea and come to the human world to collect alms only on that day. There are legends relating that he appears as a monk or a novice, and people who give alms to Phra Upakhut will be blessed with wealth in return. Therefore, northern Thais always give their alms in the early morning between 1 and 5 a.m. on full-moon Wednesday hoping for a chance to give alms to Phra Upakhut.

Recently, Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual has become more popular in the north. A number of temples have held this ritual in the temple compound so that Buddhists can make merit at the temple instead of waiting for the monks along the road. Wat Upakhut in Chiangmai Province is a principle temple where the ritual is held as one of the temple's traditions. In other provinces, such as Chiangrai and Phrae, there are also several temples hosting this ritual.

The current popularity of this ritual has led to the reproduction of Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand as it has been found in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province and Nonthaburi Province during the past five years. When the ritual is performed in the central part, there are some changes so that the ritual is in accordance with central Thailand's cultural context which is different from that of the north. Therefore, this research aims to study the reproduction of Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand to examine its similarities and differences compared to the original one in the north.

Raymond Williams' concept of cultural reproduction is used in the analysis of Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual. In society, culture is sustained through cultural reproduction, and aspects that are reproduced are selected to exist by the selective tradition of the society.³ Raymond Williams explained that the process of selective tradition in cultural reproduction happens when some meanings, values and practices are considered important and thus are transmitted or selected. Some changes and new interpretations are made in order that those practices comply with the dominant culture. Williams stated that:

But always the selectivity is the point; the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.⁴

³ Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", 39.

⁴ Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", 39.

The concept of cultural reproduction is used to study Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand. Cultural reproduction in this research is defined as the process in which some traditions are selected and valued through new cultural practices or activities. As a result, those traditions are emphasized and have become alive in a new social context. Cultural reproduction has led to reproduction of culture with a new purpose so that it is in accordance with the new situation or social context, and some new meanings are created accordingly. To illustrate, when Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is hosted in central Thailand, some patterns and details vary from the ones originally practiced in the north. This results from the adaptation of the ritual so that it complies with the central Thai culture and, therefore, can exist in the new area.

Background of Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual in Northern Thailand

Phra Upakhut is an arhat monk who appeared in the time after the Lord Buddha's Parinirvāṇa. Although his story is not found in the Pali canon, the 2,000 year-old Sanskrit literature of India, the Aśokavadāna, tells that Upagupta (the Sanskrit name of Phra Upakhut) would carry on the Lord Buddha's work after his Parinirvāṇa. Phra Upakhut defeated Māra and, through his teachings, helped 18,000 monks to attain the arahatship. The legend of Phra Upakhut in Thailand appears in chapter 28 named Mārāphanthapariwat of the Thai version of Pathomsombodhikatha, the work of The Supreme Patriarch H.R.H. Prince Paramanujitajinorasa.

When King Asoke Maharaja wanted to have a celebration for 84,000 stupas for seven years, seven months and seven days, he asked the Sangha to protect his celebration from the demon, Māra. The Sangha recalled that Kisanāga Upakhut, who resided under the sea, had magical powers to defeat Māra. So Phra Upakhut was invited to protect the celebration from the interference of Māra. During the celebration, Māra created many kinds of rain to destroy the event, but Phra Upakhut could prevent all of them. Finally, Phra Upakhut conjured up a rotten dog to fasten around the neck of Māra. No one could free Māra except Phra Upakhut, so Māra was eventually defeated. After that, Phra Upakhut used his waistband cloth to tie Māra to a great mountain until

the end of the celebration. It was only after Māra refrained from all evil deeds and converted to Buddhism that Phra Upakhut freed him.⁵



Figure 1: Mural painting of Phra Upakhut's defeat of Māra at Wat Pa Daraphirom Temple in Chiangmai Province (left). The ceremony of inviting Phra Upakhut to protect the temple's festival at Wat Phra That Hariphunchai Temple in Lamphun Province (right).

The legend regarding Phra Upakhut who has magical powers and lives under the sea is also mentioned in northern Thai Buddhist scripture called “Maha Upakhut”. The legend is about an arhat monk who resides under the sea. He is still alive and has magical powers to defeat Māra. The belief about Phra Upakhut strongly persists in the north, as it can be seen in “the invitation of Phra Upakhut” ritual to protect Buddhist ceremonies from Māra. Phra Upakhut is invited from the sea to preside over important Buddhist ceremonies of many temples in the north. In addition, there are some legends relating that Phra Upakhut will leave his under-the-sea dwelling to collect his alms on full-moon Wednesday. Therefore, giving alms to the monks on that special day has become a popular ritual among northern Thais because they believe that Phra Upakhut might be among the other monks to collect his alms and someone might have a good chance to give alms to him.

Udom Rungruangsri explained that the Lanna belief about Phra Upakhut is influenced by Burmese Buddhism since the Burmese troops

⁵ Paramanujitajinorasa, *Pathomsombodhikatha*, 266-274.

conquered Chiangmai in 1558.⁶ He also said regarding the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual that:

Lanna people believed that when the full moon falls on Wednesday, Phra Upakhut will leave his dwelling under the sea to collect his alms with other monks in the early morning. People who have a chance to give alms to Phra Upakhut will be blessed with great merit and fortune. Therefore, Lanna Buddhists prefer to give their alms at 4.00-5.00 a.m. or at the earlier time on that day.⁷

Manee Phayomyong explained that Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is related to the legend of Phra Upakhut in Lanna literature in the way that:

Upakhut Sutra tells a story of an arhat monk with magical powers who rests in the meditative trance in his bronze palace in the Naga world. He will collect his alms in the human world in order to help good people by giving them great blessing. This is related to a Thai Buddhist belief that giving food to the arhat monk after his meditative trance will bring great merit because the monk hasn't eaten anything during a long fast. Therefore, people who give alms to the monk will be blessed with great fortune; men can become noblemen and women can become millionaires' or noblemen's wives. People who give their alms to Phra Upakhut will definitely become lucky. Therefore, Lanna Thais always have Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual on full-moon Wednesday. The ritual usually takes place in early morning around 2.00-5.00 a.m. Until this day, the ritual can still be found in the north.⁸

Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is related to the belief that Phra Upakhut will leave his dwelling under the sea to collect his alms on full-moon Wednesday. Also, there is a Lanna belief that people who give their alms to the arhat monk after his meditative trance will

⁶ Udom, "Buddhism in Lanna Kingdom", 4722-4723.

⁷ Udom, "Buddhism in Lanna Kingdom", 4723.

⁸ Manee, *Lanna Traditions in 12 months*, 126-127.

receive great merit. This is reflected in the “Sosan Kamma [โสสานกัมม์]” or “Tu Chao Khao Kam [ตุเจ้าเข้ากำ]” ritual in the north. During this ritual, the monks strictly practice meditation. Lanna people usually give their alms to the monks during this period in the hope of receiving a special blessing.⁹

Due to the belief about Phra Upakhut, northern Thais prefer to give alms on full-moon Wednesday. Although the ritual begins at midnight, which is not the common time for merit making, people think of it as a special merit making which rarely occurs in a year. In the old days when it was a full-moon Wednesday, northern Thais would prepare some food and waited for the monks in front of their house at early dawn. It was not certain whether the monks would come to their house or not. Nowadays, many temples in the north hold Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at the temple so that people do not have to waste their time waiting for the monks. Wat Upakhut in Chiangmai Province particularly holds this ritual because of its background and location are related to the legend of Phra Upakhut.

Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is an important tradition of Wat Upakhut. The temple is named after Phra Upakhut and the temple's background is related to an appearance of Phra Upakhut. A legend was told that a Haw merchant found a mysterious monk at 2 a.m. on full-moon Wednesday and he offered some food to that monk. After that he became rich. Believing that this was a result of giving alms to Phra Upakhut, he later built Wat Upakhut.¹⁰ However, the legend told by Wat Upakhut is different. It says:

On one full-moon night, a poor married couple came to Chiangmai to sell their produce. They met a novice near the River Ping and gave their produce to the novice. The novice blessed them and disappeared near the banyan tree. Soon their produce sold very well, and the couple became richer. One day the couple made merit to an old monk who revealed to them that their wealth was a result of the alms given to Phra Upakhut. Phra Upakhut was

⁹ Manee, “In Sosan Kamma Period”, 851.

¹⁰ Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, 274.

in a meditative trance at the bottom of the sea and would appear as a novice on the full-moon day to help the people. Therefore, the couple built Wat Upakhut at the spot where they had found the novice and they had an image of Phra Upakhut cast based on the novice's look.¹¹

Wat Upakhut is located at the crossroads at Thaphae Avenue, Chiangmai, where, according to the legend, a married couple had given alms to Phra Upakhut and later built the temple there. Wat Upakhut is originally a place of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual and the ritual has been sustained as the temple's tradition for a long time. Phrakhruphattanathimut, the abbot of Wat Upakhut, said that Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual has been continuously held at Wat Upakhut for at least 250 years.¹²

Phrakhruphattanathimut, the present abbot of Wat Upakhut since 1998, has changed the patterns of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual. He ordered that the monks and novices should collect their alms only in the temple so that this ritual is not against Phra Vinaya (Sangha's principles) which forbids alms collection at night.¹³ The ritual at Wat Upakhut begins at 11.00 p.m. with a Sangha ceremony in the vihara including paying homage to the Phra Upakhut image, chanting and telling the story of Phra Upakhut. Since northern Thais consider the time after midnight a new day, when it is past midnight of Tuesday and full-moon Wednesday has begun, the monks will be invited to collect their alms outside the vihara. The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is a special merit-making event and this ritual has become an important tradition of Wat Upakhut.

¹¹ Phrakhruphattanathimut, *Phra Maha Upakhut, The Arhat Who Subdued Māra and the Blessor of Fortune*, 55-59.

¹² Woraluk, "Phra Upakhut, The Arhat Disciple Who Lives in the Sea", 33.

¹³ Phra Praphan Sutthajitto, *The Influence of Beliefs in Phra Upagutta*, 47-48.



Figure 2: The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at Wat Upakhut in Chiangmai Province (left-right).

At present, there are also Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving rituals in other temples such as Wat Suandok and Wat Sridonmoon in Chiangmai Province and Wat Mingmuang in Chiangrai Province. The ritual of Wat Sabokaew in Phrae Province is promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as it has been cooperatively hosted by Wat Sabokaew, TAT branch of Phrae and the municipality of Phrae. In 2013, the ritual had been consecutively held for five years and has become one of the tourism festivals included in the Phrae tourism activities.¹⁴

The deep-rooted belief about Phra Upakhut in Lanna society and the current trend of religious tourism in Thailand have contributed to the existence of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual. The ritual is continuously performed in the north and also has become one of the unique northern traditions. The concept of making special merit on a special day which rarely occurs and the belief about good fortune have made this ritual appealing to people living in the age of consumerism. Consequently, the ritual is becoming more popular.

The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual is not only important for northern Thais, but also impresses tourists from other parts of the country who have attended the event. The ritual is now a selling point of religious tourism in the north. The Phra Upakhut

¹⁴ “TAT in Phrae Province Invites to Join in Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual at Wat Sabokaew Temple in Phrae Province”, online.

midnight almsgiving ritual exists in the north through the process of cultural transmission which preserves the local identity and presents it as a selling point for cultural tourism. The ritual boosts the local economy and tourism, and can fulfill Buddhists' wishes for great merit in today's world of consumerism.

The Reproduction of the Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province

The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual has been held at Prachuap Khiri Khan Province during the past five years by the “Phenphut Prachuap” (full-moon Wednesday in Prachuap Khiri Khan) group, a small group of people who have faith in Phra Upakhut. The group has learned of the story of Phra Upakhut who defeated Māra and who would protect Buddhism for 5,000 years, and has started participating in alms giving on full-moon Wednesday. They had a Phra Upakhut image created and placed at Prachuap Bay in Muang district, Prachuap Khiri Khan in order to pay their homage to Phra Upakhut and to promote the almsgiving ritual.

Background and Context of Phra Upakhut Almsgiving Ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan

Although Prachuap Khiri Khan is considered to be in the western region of Thailand, it shares some central Thai culture. The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual was started in Prachuap Khiri Khan municipality, not in the temple and was not initiated by the monks. The ritual was instead hosted in the municipality's public park by the Phenphut Prachuap group who wanted to give alms to the monks on full-moon Wednesday when Phra Upakhut would collect his alms in the human world as told in the legend.

The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan was initiated by Mr. Anuphap Phoonsawat, the coordinator of Phenphut Prachuap group, at Muang Prachuap city in 2009. The faith in Phra Upakhut of Mr. Anuphap began after he was told by a venerable monk that Phra Upakhut will leave his meditative trance when the world is facing disasters. He will then appear as a novice to collect alms on full-

moon Wednesday.¹⁵ Later, Mr. Anuphap started telling the story of Phra Upakhut to introduce the faith to people while working at the Health Care Center of Provincial Administrative Organization of Prachuap Khiri Khan. He has continuously disseminated the knowledge about Phra Upakhut as a disciple of the Buddha who defeated Māra and would protect Buddhism for 5,000 years. The promoting of the Phra Upakhut story by referring to stories in Asokavadana and Pathomsomphothikatha literature makes people recognize Phra Upakhut as an important arhat monk in Buddhism.

In promoting the belief about Phra Upakhut, Mr. Anuphap clarified that the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual was originally performed in the north, not a newly invented practice. Initially, there were approximately 50 persons joining the first Phra Upakhut Almsgiving on full-moon Wednesday in 2009, but the number of believers has continuously increased. After that there have been several activities to pay homage to Phra Upakhut, such as the formation of the Phenphut Prachuap group, a group chanting on the third Wednesday of every month and donations collecting to build a Phra Upakhut image named “Luangpoo Upakhut (Grandfather Upakhut)” at the seaside of Muang Prachuap city in 2011.¹⁶

The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual at Muang Prachuap is held in Prachuap Khiri Khan municipal public park near the seaside instead of at a temple. Moreover, unlike in the north, the ritual is not held after midnight of Tuesday. On the contrary, it is performed at 6 a.m. of the full-moon Wednesday when the monks are invited to collect alms on a seaside road near the pavilion of the image of “Luangpoo Upakhut”.

The researcher participated in the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual at Muang Prachuap on 28 November 2012. The ceremony started with the chanting of the monks at 5 a.m. Then everybody chanted the gāthā of Phra Upakhut and recited the five precepts and the Upatasanti gāthā, the ancient gāthā from the north. The Phenphut group chants the Upatasanti gāthā together on the third Wednesday of every month and in the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual as they believe that the

¹⁵ “Phra Upakhut’s Image at the Municipality of Prachuap”, 24.

¹⁶ Anuphap, Interview.

Upatasanti gāthā has a special power to bless His Majesty the King and can ward off all dangers.

The almsgiving begun after the chanting of the Upatasanti gāthā. Twenty sets of alms were prepared for 19 monks who were invited and the extra set was for Luangpoo Upakhut. There were approximately 100 people joining the ceremony. The almsgiving at sunrise looked like the “Teworohana [เทโวโรหณะ]” almsgiving after Buddhist Lent, but was different in terms of background. The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual was performed only on full-moon Wednesday based on the legend that Phra Upakhut would come to the human world to help people on that special day.

Ways of Reproduction of Phra Upakhut Almsgiving Ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan

Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan is modeled on the “Takbat Pengpud [ตักบาตรเป็งปูด]” ritual in the north. However, as the ritual was not originated in central Thailand, some patterns and details were changed to agree with the central Thai culture. It can be seen in the name of the ritual which was changed to “Takbat Phenphut” following the central Thailand pronunciation. Other changes include the time of the almsgiving and the emphasis of Phra Upakhut in a more concrete way.

The Change of Almsgiving Time on Full-moon Wednesday

The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual at Prachuap Khiri Khan is different from the one practiced in the north in terms of the time of almsgiving. The ritual in the north is performed after midnight of Tuesday, the time which northern Thais considered Wednesday morning and Phra Upakhut will collect his alms at that sacred time. The ritual is also known as the midnight almsgiving, which it is believed to be an event of greater merit. Differently, the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan is performed in the morning after sunrise which is a common time of almsgiving. Thus, the almsgiving time is changed to fit with the daily Buddhist life.



Figure 3: The pavilion of “Luangpoo Upakhut” image (left). Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual at the seaside of Muang Prachuap city (right).

The time of the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan agrees with the time division of Thai astrology which explains that a new day starts at 6 a.m. as mentioned in Phromachart Book.¹⁷ Therefore, Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan at 6 a.m. is still considered the morning of full-moon Wednesday, even though the ritual starts later than the ritual in the north.

In changing the time of Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual, the sacred and mysterious time when Phra Upakhut would appear has been changed to be a common time for Buddhist almsgiving. The new time is more suitable for Buddhists and agrees with the Phra Vinaya, making the ritual more convenient and complying with the way of life in central Thailand where the midnight almsgiving did not exist in the past.

The Emphasis of the Concrete Symbol of Phra Upakhut

The emphasis of the concrete symbol of Phra Upakhut by the construction of Luangpoo Upakhut and the addition of Upatasanti Gāthā chanting is another way to reproduce the midnight almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan.

The Construction of Luangpoo Upakhut Placed at the Seaside of Prachuap Khiri Khan

In 2011, the Phenphut Prachuap group organized the “Thodphapa Samakki (Giving the off-season offering to the temple)” to collect

¹⁷ P. Suwan, *Phromachart Book for People*, 191.

donations to build the Phra Upakhut image named “Luangpoo Upakhut” at the seaside of Muang Prachuap. The donation amounted to 1,500,000 baht and the construction of Luangpoo Upakhut and the pavilion were completed without having to ask for help from the government. The celebration of Luangpoo Upakhut was held on 27 October 2012 and, from that time onwards, the Phenphut Prachuap group usually arranges group chanting on the third Wednesday of every month and Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in the compound of the pavilion.

The construction of the Luangpoo Upakhut image at the seaside of Prachuap Khiri Khan originated from the belief about the magical powers of Phra Upakhut. The Phenphut Prachuap group believed that Phra Upakhut would protect Thailand from all dangers, especially natural disasters which have continuously occurred. Natural disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, have made people feel scared, so they thought of Phra Upakhut as a person who could protect them from danger.¹⁸ Moreover, the place where the Phra Upakhut image and the pavilion are located is near the seaside. This is similar to the belief about Phra Upakhut’s dwelling at the bottom of the sea.¹⁹ The threat posed by recent natural disasters, the protective power of Phra Upakhut, and a good location which is similar to the legend led to the construction of Phra Upakhut image near the seaside.

The construction of the Luangpoo Upakhut image is a visible symbol representing the appearance of Phra Upakhut in Prachuap Khiri Khan. In addition, this emphasizes the importance of Phra Upakhut as an arhat monk who subdued Māra and asserts that Phra Upakhut is not a Burmese monk whose story was mentioned in local Burmese and Lanna beliefs. On the contrary, Phra Upakhut is an important disciple of the Buddha according to Buddhist legends. As a result, the people in Prachuap Khiri Khan revere the image of Luangpoo Upakhut as the holy spirit of the city, even though the image was just newly constructed in 2012.

¹⁸ “Let’s donate to the construction of Phra Upakhut’s Image and Practice 5 Precepts to Pay Homage as the Buddhist”, online.

¹⁹ Anuphap, Interview.

In the pavilion compound, there are marble inscriptions narrating the legend of Phra Upakhut, how to pay homage, and the Buddha's prediction of disasters during the second half of the Buddhist Era. The inscriptions encourage people to adhere strongly to Buddhism and have faith in the magical powers of Phra Upukhut who could save Buddhists.



Figure 4: Luangpoo Upakhut image (left). The celebration of Luangpoo Upakhut in 2012 (right).

Another visible symbol of Phra Upakhut is the offering of alms to the Luangpoo Upakhut image and the monks who form a line in front of the pavilion of Luangpoo Upakhut. Giving alms to Luangpoo Upakhut and the monks creates a feeling of meeting and giving alms to Phra Upakhut in person. Luangpoo Upakhut and the monks represent the appearance of Phra Upakhut in Prachuap Khiri Khan. Although the almsgiving is not performed at the sacred time between Tuesday night and full-moon Wednesday morning as in the north, it seems as if Phra Upakhut in the legend really appeared in the form of Luangpoo Upakhut.

The Addition of Upatasanti Gāthā Chanting

Another element to the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan is Upatasanti gāthā chanting. This activity is found only in Prachuap Khiri Khan and is highly meaningful to the Phenphut Prachuap group.

The Upatasanti gāthā which the Phenphut Prachuap group chant together on the third Wednesday of every month is the principal chant in the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual. It is believed that this gāthā will dispel evils and dangers, as well as bring happiness to those who pray. Moreover, Upatasanti gāthā chanting is intended to bless HM the King of Thailand.

Upatasanti gāthā chanting reflects the belief that Phra Upakhut has magical powers to subdue Māra and dispel all evils and obstacles. Upatasanti gāthā, which is in the Lanna scripture, is used by the Phenphut Prachuap group in the context related to Phra Upakhut and in blessing HM the King because of the great protective power perceived in this gāthā. It is said in the Upatasanti chanting book of the Phenphut Prachuap group that:

The Upatasanti gāthā, whether it is chanted for the dead or the living, would free them from their suffering and lead them to happiness. All gods and kings alike would be blessed with might and blessing by the power of Upatasanti gāthā. The harm caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, the catastrophe from the sky, from the solar and lunar eclipse, the calamity caused by sins, all of these can be warded off by the power of Upatasanti gāthā.²⁰

The Phenphut Prachuap group's belief in the power of the Upatasanti gāthā is similar to the Lanna belief about chanting or listening to Upatasanti Pakorn. It is believed that the power of Upatasanti Pakorn will protect those who pray from danger, help them conquer all enemies, and free them from evils. Their wishes will be granted and pure bliss is ensured. Chanting Upatasanti Pakorn for other people will rid them of their suffering and bring them to heaven.²¹

Chanting the Upatasanti gāthā in the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual is an activity which promotes the protection power of Phra Upakhut to Buddhists and emphasizes the importance of Phra Upakhut

²⁰ Phenphut Prachuap Khiri Khan group, *the Upatasanti chanting book*, 1.

²¹ Bamphen, "Anisamsa of Upatasanti", 7900.

almsgiving ritual on the special day. The chanting makes the belief about Phra Upakhut more concrete in Prachuap Khiri Khan.

The change in the almsgiving time, together with an emphasis on concrete symbols by constructing the Luangpoo Upakhut image and the addition of Upatasanti gāthā chanting have made the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan become noteworthy and different from the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual of the north.

The Reproduction of the Phra Upakhut Almsgiving Ritual in Nonthaburi Province

Wat Teuk [วัดเทือก] in Tambon Bangphai, Muang District, Nonthaburi Province presents itself as the first temple where Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual was held in central Thailand. The field data about the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual at Wat Teuk was collected between 20-21 August 2013, when the ritual was held for the fourth time after the first one held in 2011.

Background and Context of the Phra Upakhut Almsgiving Ritual in Nonthaburi

Wat Teuk is located on the bank of the Chao Phraya River and far from the main street. The temple is undergoing extensive construction as it can be seen from the construction of Phra Upakhut images, the vihara of Phra Upakhut and the Pathama Buddha images during 2011-2013. Here the ritual is entitled “Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual” or “Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual (Phenphut)”. In 2013, there was only one full-moon Wednesday, which fell on August 21. The activities on that day included the celebration of the first Pathama Buddha image, the casting of the second Pathama Buddha image, and the Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual. The 2013 ritual at Wat Teuk started with the ordination of 35 novices, called “Upakhut novices”, on Tuesday, 20 August, and afterwards all the new novices collected alms with the monks at midnight. The ceremony began with head shaving at 10 a.m., followed by the ordination at 3 p.m. in the ordination hall.

The Phra Upakhut almsgiving ritual was jointly held by the temple, the community and Wat Teuk school, a local school where most

Upakhut novices study. The persons who played an important role in initiating the ritual were two local residents – Ms. Mayurapat Amphrot and Mr. Chakree Amphrot – who had joined a Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in the north and found the ritual impressive. Therefore, they wanted to hold a Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in their district in order to promote Wat Teuk as a tourist attraction. The main purpose was to attract central Thais who believed in Phra Upakhut to participate in a Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at the temple. In doing so, it would be more convenient and time-saving since people would not have to go to the north to attend the ritual.

In 2011, the first Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual was held at Wat Teuk and a Phra Upakhut image was cast for people to worship. Initially, Phra Upakhut was not well-known among the people in Nonthaburi, so the organizers continuously promoted the story of Phra Upakhut. The legend of Phra Upakhut was repetitively told on the day of the ritual. Also, there was a Lanna-style procession of Phra Upakhut and novices to Thanam Non pier in order to promote the ritual. However, in 2013 the procession was cancelled because there was not enough time for several activities, including the casting and celebration of the Buddha images. In any event, this did not affect the ritual because it has been held four consecutive times, so more people has become well aware of the ritual.²²

Ways of Reproduction of the Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual in Nonthaburi

The Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual in Nonthaburi follows the pattern of the original northern ritual. When the Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving ritual is reproduced in central Thailand, some patterns are still the same, but some have been changed. Novice ordination is an addition to the ritual, so the ritual in Nonthaburi is different from the one performed in the north.

²² Chakree, interview.

Keeping the Main Patterns of the Phra Upakhut Midnight Almsgiving Ritual of the North

Since the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at Wat Teuk follows the pattern of the ritual in the north, on full-moon Wednesday the site is decorated in Lanna style and the legend of Phra Upakhut is continuously related. Also, the time of almsgiving is the same as that of the northern one, and both the monks and novices are invited to collect alms in order to follow the northern legend. As a result, the ritual of Wat Teuk is similar to the ritual of the north.

The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at Wat Teuk is aimed to attract central Thais by a ritual similar to the northern one, but it is more convenient since people do not have to go to the north. At the time of the ritual, the temple is decorated in Lanna style in order to create the environment of the northern ritual. *Tung* [ตุง] (a piece of cloth used for decoration) and *chong* [จ้อง] (a kind of umbrella), traditional Lanna offerings, were used to decorate the place of the Phra Upakhut images. As well, people could offer *tung* to pay homage to the Phra Upakhut images. The Lanna-style decoration and offering made the site of the ritual unique and different from other areas of the temple.

In addition, there is an emphasis on the northern version of Phra Upakhut's legend. During the time of the ritual, the temple announcer continuously told the legend:

Phra Upakhut is still alive until these days. There is a 200-year-old tradition about Phra Upakhut in the north. It is believed that he leaves the bottom of the sea and appears as a novice to collect alms. This is the background of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual. People who give alms to Phra Upakhut would recover from illnesses, be intelligent, and are blessed with fortune. They would face no danger and can conquer all obstacles as Phra Upakhut is the person who defeated Māra. It doesn't matter if the story of Phra Upakhut is true or just a legend, Phra Upakhut is the one who will protect Buddhism for 5,000 years. Wat Teuk is the first temple in Central Thailand where Phra Upakhut images were

placed. Wat Teuk is the first temple which introduced the belief of Phra Upakhut to the central part of the country.²³

The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual of Wat Teuk was held at the similar time of the north. Monks and novices were invited to collect alms after midnight of Tuesday because that time was considered full-moon Wednesday according to the northern astrology. However, the time of the almsgiving was more specific as the ritual is called “the midnight almsgiving”. At midnight, which is a transition from Tuesday to Wednesday, the announcer invites all the monks and novices to collect alms from the people inside the temple. The name “midnight almsgiving ritual” clearly explains the feature of the ritual and the ritual is mainly known by that name.

The Addition of Novice Ordination and the Role of Novices in the Ritual

The addition of novice ordination to the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual of Wat Teuk makes the ritual different from the original one. The organizers emphasize novice ordination because giving alms to the novice is in accordance with the legend suggesting that Phra Upakhut sometimes appeared as a novice. Therefore, both monks and novices are invited to collect alms in the ritual. Novice ordination is arranged on Tuesday morning, so that the new novices can join the almsgiving on full-moon Wednesday. Most Upakhut novices are Wat Teuk school students who live in the district. To be ordained, children have to be at least four years old. In case the novices are too small to carry an alms-bowl, their parents will help them during the ritual. Both children and parents are willing to join this special event because they want to make merit during the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual.

Before the ordination, the children will learn about the ceremonies and recite the chants because they play an important part in the ritual. Upakhut novices have to be able to tell the story of Phra Upakhut, teach Dharma, and chant the Pothibat gāthā [คาถาโพธิบาท] and Mongkhon Chakawan Paedthit gāthā [คาถามงคลจักรวาลแปดทิศ] to get rid of all evils. Their most important role is to collect alms with the monks at midnight.

²³ The temple announcer, sound recording.

The temple announcer often emphasizes that giving alms to Upakhut novices will bring great merit because the new novices are innocent and sinless. Giving alms to Upakhut novices is similar to giving alms to Phra Upakhut.



Figure 5: The ordination of Upakhut novices in the ritual at Wat Teuk (left). The Upakhut novices' collecting alms (right).

The addition of the Upakhut novice to the ritual can attract considerable public attention. The perceived innocence and loveliness of Upakhut novices who preach, chant, give blessing, and collect alms have made Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual at Wat Teuk more popular especially in social media. Some participants said that they had seen photos of Upakhut novices from their friend's Facebook pages and felt interested. The ritual promotional posters and signboards also focus on the innocence of Upakhut novices. According to the organizers, some parents intend to have their children ordained at Wat Teuk because there is no Upakhut novice ordination in the northern ritual.²⁴

The addition of Upakhut novices ordination to the ritual, and the role of novices in preaching, chanting, giving blessing, and collecting alms makes the ritual at Wat Teuk ritual different from that of the north. Upakhut novices collecting alms on full-moon Wednesday also symbolizes the appearance of Phra Upakhut at Wat Teuk. As a result, it

²⁴ Chakree, interview.

appears that the legend about Phra Upakhut in the guise of a novice collecting alms on full-moon Wednesday is realized at Wat Teuk.

Conclusion

The reproduction of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand includes some elements that make the ritual different from that of the north. Although the rituals in Prachuap Khiri Khan and Nonthaburi are modeled after the ritual in the north and the legend of Phra Upakhut on full-moon Wednesday, some patterns and details are different. The most important difference is the time of almsgiving. The almsgiving ritual in Nonthaburi province is held after midnight of Tuesday, similar to the northern ritual. This practice follows the sacred time as suggested in the Phra Upakhut legend. On the contrary, the ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan takes place at 6 a.m. on full-moon Wednesday. In other words, the sacred time which is the transition from Tuesday night to Wednesday morning has been changed to the dawn of Wednesday.

Moreover, the northern belief that Phra Upakhut is among the monks who collect alms on full-moon Wednesday is not emphasized in central Thailand. The belief, on the contrary, is realized by some concrete components added to the ritual. To illustrate, the ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan is held in the compound of the Luangpoo Upakhut pavilion and a set of offerings is especially prepared for Luangpoo Upakhut. Therefore, Luangpoo Upakhut at Prachuap Kirikan represents Phra Upakhut. Similarly, Upakhut novices who collect alms in the Nonthaburi ritual represent Phra Upakhut. These concrete symbols have created a feeling of meeting Phra Upakhut in person and signified that everybody certainly has a chance to give alms to Phra Upakhut.

It is found that concrete elements have been constructed in central Thailand's rituals in order to realize Phra Upakhut's story to central Thais who have no knowledge of Phra Upakhut. The additional concrete elements are the construction of Luangpoo Upakhut's image, the food offerings to the image in Prachuap Khiri Khan and the construction of the Phra Upakhut image and Upakhut novice ordination in Nonthaburi .

The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual of the north can interest Buddhists in central Thailand because of its outstanding characteristics. This northern ritual is performed only on full-moon Wednesday, which rarely occurs, and, thus, makes it different from common almsgivings that usually take place in the morning. In addition, due to the fact that the legend of Phra Upakhut's magical powers and his blessing is appealing to Buddhists, the temples often underline the special merit of the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving.

The Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual might be new to central Thailand, but it is related to the existing northern ritual. Therefore, the reproduction of the ritual in the central part is carried out through the borrowing of the northern ritual and reproducing it in central Thailand. This makes it possible for the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual to become alive in a new area.

It can be said that the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in central Thailand is an invented tradition because it shares the same concept of the invented tradition as stated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger:

“Invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.²⁵

The invented tradition covers the practices originated from elements in the society, such as legends, traditions, rituals, history, with a connection between the new practices and the existing elements. Some newly-constructed practices were not passed down from the past generations, but are accepted by the society because people are acquainted with it. Moreover, it is possible to trace the period when they started and the person or community who started them.²⁶

²⁵ Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

²⁶ Ekkarin, *Phra Rahu: Invented Tradition at Wat Srisathong Temple*, 14-15.

To sum up, the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual in Prachuap Khiri Khan and Nonthaburi can be considered invented tradition in the central part of Thailand. This phenomenon happened because a northern practice was borrowed and reproduced in a new area in order to serve the religious need of central Thais. The reproduction has given Buddhists in central Thais a chance to make special merit on full-moon Wednesday without having to spend time travelling to the north.

Although the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual has taken place for only five years in central Thailand, it has been accepted by Buddhists in the area because of the reference to the Phra Upakhut story as a disciple of the Buddha. At first, central Thais might not have been acquainted with the belief about an arhat monk by the name of Phra Upakhut who lives under the sea. By spreading the belief of Phra Upakhut as a disciple of the Buddha, the public became familiar with the new ritual. The ritual is not only accepted as a northern ritual, but also as a Buddhist ritual. Therefore, the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual was reproduced from elements in Buddhism. Although the ritual has its root in the north, its reference to Buddhism makes Buddhists in central Thailand accept it.

When the Phra Upakhut midnight almsgiving ritual was reproduced in central Thailand, some patterns and details were changed so that the borrowed ritual fit in the culture of the new area. The ritual has now become well-known and accepted by Buddhists in central Thailand as a special Buddhist almsgiving understood to bring greater blessing compared to general almsgiving.

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