Theravada Buddhism among the Shan:
Transformations in the Shan Monastic Life Cycle and Shan Community

TAKASHI HASHIMOTO
SOAS, University of London

Introduction

Shan communities can be found in the Union of Myanmar as well as in Thailand. The Shan peoples are classified in the Tai ethnic group according to language and ethnicity. Most Shans believe in Buddhism, while some are animist and Christian. As we can see the map in Figure 1, the Shan state is the largest land area in the Union of Myanmar, and borders Thailand, Laos and China. In terms of tradition, Shan attempt to continue their culture and their identity in various ways. The Shan ordination and monastic life cycle are especially important for understanding the Shan community. It is generally said that the Buddhist monastery continues its traditions, such as monastic education, rituals, and ceremonies. However, some contents of monastic events are changed though monastic monks and lay believers, to some extent, still practice and perform in their traditional way. Therefore, this essay will argue that although Shan Buddhist traditions continue in ritual and in practice amongst the Shans, the modern ordination ritual for young novices and the monastic life cycle are losing their ‘orthodoxy’ in a social and political context. This transformation is understood as being due to the influence of degenerating social communication and oppression by the Myanmar government. In order to explore this change, this essay will analyse a novice ordination, namely Poy Sang Long, the monastic recitation, such as the Tham Vessantara-jātaka and the Shan monastic learning system as well as Zare culture.

Basic information about the Shan Buddhist community

From the perspective of the Theravada Buddhist doctrine, monks pursue the highest level of realisation, which is called nibbana (meaning enlightenment in Pali), through religious practices in the context of the monastic rules. These monks become mendicants or almspersons, who are called bhikkus in Pali (Swearer 2010, 51). Novice monks follow the five precepts and then eight precepts. Higher monks have 227 precepts (Swearer 2010, 51). According to Milne (2001, 51), in the early 19th century, Shan boys were taught to recite the Buddhist teachings in Pali and Shan. They memorized all the sacred passages, which was supplemented with teachings from higher monks. Additionally,
monks and boys often had a good teaching relationship. When boys grew up, they went to monks to receive advice and the children inevitably learned moral behaviour from monks (Milne 2001, 51-52). It is believed that this learning system formed the basis for a moral society.

Shan Novice Ordination and Recitation Ceremony

A popular traditional religious event in the Shan state is called Poy sang long, which is a large novice ordination festival intended as a ‘rite of passage’ among Shans (Tannenbaum 2001, 128). This ceremony is usually held every five or six years as decided by the village. The age range of a boy who will participate in the ceremony is from ten or eleven to twenty. In Myanmar, however, the ceremony is usually held when the boy is four or five years old. The parents and son who participate must make a decision of a sponsor while planning the ordination. Parents may become sponsors and relatives may join with them. A non-relative may also be a sponsor. This is because the sponsoring of boys creates a ‘parent-child relationship’, and the boy they helped at the time of his novice ordination will assist sponsors at their own funerals (Tannenbaum 2001, 129). This relationship is still a crucial function for the family who has no child. Elderly people who have no child do not need to worry about their funerals as long as they sponsor boys. However, the plausible problem is that some people use this system not for religious beliefs, but for personal benefit, and their involvement depends on whether they have the capital to assist a novice ordination.

The Shan traditional novice ordination ceremony can be seen in northern Thailand, primarily in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. These northern Thai cities are located near the national boundary between Thai and Shan state of Burma so that a number of Shan immigrants have legally and illegally immigrated to these cities in order to avoid political suppression from the Myanmar government and to improve their educational and economic situation (Eberhardt 2009, 51). As in the Shan states, the Poy Sang Long ceremony is an annual event in these provinces and a large number of young boys participate and are ordained. It is usually held in the summer vacation between April and May. On the day before the ceremony, these boys have their hair shaved by a monk. Then, in the middle of the day of the ceremony, as Pince Siddārtha in the palace before becoming a mendicant, these children are costumed in a similar way. The sponsors carry them on their shoulders, mimicking the way the prince rode a horse from the palace. Their feet do not touch the ground. After they are in ‘royal mode’ for three days, children change princely clothes to yellow robes and recite their ordination vows as novice monks. They stay in the monastery for a short period (Eberhardt 2009, 55-56).

This ceremony can be viewed as an ethnic festival to show Shan identity in spite of political oppression by the Myanmar government, and is especially commonplace amongst Shan migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand. According to Eberhardt (2009, 57), the event in the city contains a social and political background. When Eberhardt researched Shan migrants in Chiang Mai (2006, 7), they were regarded as ‘illegal aliens’ and an ‘exploitable labour force’. Their living there was seen as ‘a political issue, a social problem’ and ‘a humanitarian crisis’. But for others it was viewed as an ‘economic opportunity’. Additionally, as Eberhardt (2009, 58) argued, sponsorship has changed from individual supporters to ‘organising committees’. This transformation indicates that the three-day ceremony is planned with professionalized skill. Based on this context, the novice ordination transformed a Buddhist rite of passage into an ethnic festival. Moreover, the Poy Sang Long ceremony is expressed for ‘the hopes and aspirations of a community of politically marginalised Shan people’ (Ibid). For example, young people play electric instruments, performing Shan pop songs, such as Wan Tai Tay Loat Laew or ‘On Shan Day We will Be Free from domination,’ in this particular event in order to show Shan identity (Ferguson 2009, 65).

Monastic recitation: the Tham Vessantara-jātaka

The recitation of the Tham Vessantara-jātaka has two types of religious ceremonies associated with it; they are the Tang-Than-pa-phee-nee and the Tang-Than-vesan Long. The former ceremony, the Tang-Than-pa-phee-nee, is the annual recitation of the Tham Vessantara-jātaka at each monastery. This event takes place at a monastery with the novice’s sponsors and lay people from the village or town, so that sponsors can make merit from the recitation. The
latter one, the *Tang-Tham-vesan Long*, is the occasional recitation, which is held for three days and three nights. It can be argued that the Shan popular monastic recitation of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka* requires excessive expenses for offerings. The requestors have to prepare offerings of food for monks and participants, in addition to building a new preaching hall and offering gifts to monasteries (Pannyawamsa 2009, 131).

This *Tang-Tham-vesan Long* recitation is very costly and brings the possibility of impoverishing families as a result it is believed that only experienced people have the levels of experience necessary for preparing the recitation ceremony. In total there are six stages: (1) ‘Dan Song Sa Lark, offering food and other requisites to monks by drawing a lottery system; (2) donating sets of robes either to the Buddha or monks; (3) *Dan Tham Nam ao*, offering *Tham* sugar cane juice; (4) *Tang-Tham kam nam*, donating a chosen *Tham* to enhance one’s fortune in life; (5) raising one’s son to become a novice or a monk; (6) *Tang-Tham-va-sa-long* recitation, taking the sponsorship of the great recitation of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka*. (Pannyawamsa 2009, 128-129). Sponsors want to organise the final level of offering, the *Tang-Tham-va-sa-long* recitation, to make more merit so that they satisfy the requirements as set forth by the first five levels. This way, they are able to perform the recital. Middle-class families do not perform the high cost ceremony, but rich families can perform all the steps. However, some families decide not to follow the graduated levels and perform every making-merit ceremony at once. As a result of this, they may become impoverished or even fall into debt (Pannyawamsa 2009, 129).

This suggests, to some, the degeneration of social communication and the lack of knowledge of the six levels of merit making. Traditionally, people who want to perform the ceremony consulted with elder people in the community. The village elders asked them whether they had already passed each steps of the offering. Unless they fulfil the six steps, they had to follow the levels step by step. Senior members of society would sometimes suggest a villager “against sponsorship on the ground of excessive use” (Pannyawamsa 2009, 129). The consulting system assisted villagers in terms of preventing over-offering, but in the present day the system has loosened considerably so that a village family may become impoverished.

There are two plausible reasons why the consulting system does not function well. One reason is that some families do not know or understand the levels of merit making. Another is that some families cannot foresee the financial consequences of becoming a sponsor, since this kind of offering requires long-term economic planning and investment. Otherwise, they seem to misunderstand the idea of merit. In short, the Shan popular monastic recitation of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka* causes poverty in some families due to the degeneration of social communication and lack of knowledge of the six levels of merit making, though the activity plays a vital role to enhance communication between the monastic and lay communities.

**Monastic Education among Shans**

As for monastic education, it can be argued that the educational policy by the Myanmar government influences not only the Shan monastic education, but also serves to make Shan children literate. The Burmese government promotes a written examination-based education system in Burmese and Pali languages. This system has two examinations, such as *Paṭhamapayan* and *Dhammacariya*. The examinations take over six days and entail embedding translation skills for three days and interpretation skills for three days. The interpretation exam allows the candidates to refer to texts, such as the *nīkā* (sub-commentaries) to the *ātakāhās*, the *Netippakaraṇa*, the *Paṭṭhāna* in the *Abhidhammapiṭṭaka*, the *Subodhālankāra*, the *Vutṭodaya*, the *Kaccāyana* Pali grammar, and the *Abhidhammattasaṅgaha* (Dhammasami 2009, 42).

This education system seems to be a fascinating programme to acquire the Buddhist teachings as it includes the *Tipitaka3*, which the Shan monastic educationists wish to study in the Buddhist education. However, it also includes difficulties among the Shan students and is thought to endanger the Shan language. In the 1950s, showing non-Burman minority ethnic identity vis-a-vis the Burmese government became more possible, and the Shan people, along with the *Sangha* began to have ‘aspirations’ for Buddhist examinations in Kengtung and Mong Nang. In 1957, a board of Buddhist monastic examinations was established in Pang Long. This board designed the Shan monastic exami-
nation, namely *Pariyatti-saddhappala* (Dhammasami 2009, 41-42).

The Shan examination is based on the *Tipitaka* and is very similar to governmental examinations, the *Pathama-paya* and the *Dhammacariya*. The Shan monasteries do not have the texts in Shan for the examination. Although there are Shan translations of the canonical works, there is no translated commentary in Shan. The Shan students have to learn the texts in Burmese but take the exam in Shan. It is difficult for them to sit the exam in a language in which they never learned the subjects, and compete for the same governmental degrees and scholarship opportunities as ethnic Burmuns. Therefore, there is an increase in students taking the exam in Burmese and consequently the number of students learning Shan is reduced. In fact, some Shan monks have received the *Dhammacariya* degree in Burmese, but not in Shan. This influence, it is believed, could contribute to the extinction of the Shan language (Dhammasami 2009, 42).

While the Shan monastic examination should closely follow the government examination, the Shan learning system has to exclude the poetic style in Shan language, such as *jātaka* stories, and local folktales. This abandonment will impact monks and students as well as ordinary lay Buddhists. The de-emphasis on the Shan poetic style is unfortunate because the study of Shan Buddhist poetry is considered important to scholars, and traditionally appeals to an illiterate audience in the context of religious ceremonies (Dhammasami 2009, 42-43). Thus, as a consequence, the exclusion of the poetic style in the Shan monastic learning curriculum, may lead to a broader absence of knowledge about Buddhist teachings and traditional narratives among Shans.

**Lay Practice - Zare Recitation**

As we turn our attention to the Shan lay tradition of Buddhist recitation, or the *lik long* tradition, it appears that lay practices are less subject to outside influence while Buddhist monks’ practices are most likely to be changed by political influences. The *lik long* tradition is one of the most important cultural practices on religious occasions and is comparable to ceremonies, such as temple-sleeping, inauguration of a new house, the New Year’s celebration or during the building of a new temple. In these events, *Zare* performs the *lik long*. The *Zare* are the scholars who conserve and perform the Shan traditional Buddhist readings (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 1). The ideal *Zare* performance needs significant practice to acquire skills to recite poetry properly. This is because the *lik long* texts are complicated. Firstly, the texts, especially the *Mahāsātipāṭhānasuttaṃ*, were compiled many times. Secondly, the texts include various textual traditions, such as Buddhist teachings, their interpretation, tales, history and admiration. Thirdly, they consist of four different languages, such as Shan and other Tai languages, *Pali*, and Burmese. Besides, these languages are from different language families, giving them dissimilar phonemes and written script. Finally, the *lik long* tradition is poetic in style. It needs to rhyme and have a specific tone (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 3-4). Therefore, it is very difficult to acquire the skills for mastering the recitation of the poems.

It might be thought that highly educated monks perform this recitation. However, the *Zare* refers mostly to lay followers; most of them are men, while some are women. As far as education of *Zare*, as Crosby and Khur-Yearn (2010, 6) argued, they require higher education. At first, *Zare* started learning the *lik long* tradition in the local monastery in the same way that other Theravada Buddhist communities had. These *Zare* were ordained at the age of eight or nine, as is usual, and often studied at a number of different monasteries. Although most of them finally finished the education, some continued long after having completed their education. Moreover, *Zare* education often continued outside the monastery. For instance, Zao Kang Suea, a famous *Zare*, had a number of students at his home after his marriage (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 6).

The monastic education is still vital function among Shan lay people who want to become *Zare*. This is because *Zare* require training in Shan script and it is only the monasteries along the Myanmar-Thai border that provide teachings of the Shan script. In addition, there are two steps of training *hwa lik* (to read *lik long*). The first is learning the Shan script at a monastery from the head monks. After this, the trainee learns *hwa lik* from a specific *Zare*. Men usually learned from more than one teacher to develop their ability and increase their repertoire by visiting different monasteries and study.
with specific Zare. (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 7). However, this Zare education became in danger of disappearing during the first half of the 20th century with ‘the introduction of secular, often co-educational schools’ (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 6).

In addition to Zare education, when comparing the Zare and the monks in rituals, the Zare is freely allowed access to Theravada literary culture and to travel to different monasteries, whereas the monk commonly has restrictions on his activity. This is largely because the Burmese government controls the religious activity of the Shan Buddhist monks. Examples emerge in interviews with monks regarding the regulations for monks as set forth by the government. These are:

• To give a talk as a monk at another temple, you need permission from six levels: commander of the division; military intelligence; chief of police at division level; chief of police at township level; the civilian council also at both district and town level.

• To get the permission from these people, the first thing you need is a ‘green light’, a piece of paper/sponsor letter from the township Sanghanayaka.

• To give one dhamma talk, the permit may cost the equivalent of GBP 4-500 (USD 6-820)

• After the talk a copy has to be sent to the military intelligence.

• At a dhamma talk, two or three military intelligence or police officers will usually be present.

The above-mentioned stipulations tell us that monks are assumed to be “potential political instruments or threats” by the Burmese government (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 6-7). As monks need to receive permission from government authorities to give talks, political oppression has the effects of inhibiting the healthy development of traditional Shan religious culture. Additionally, the transformation of the Shan monastic education tells us that in the current political context, monks have to replace their usage of Shan language with Burmese in religious education. Similarly, the training of the Zare culture shows the necessity of monastic education to protect Shan culture. Some might say that the transformation of the religious events and practice is an inevitable phenomenon as one of the fundamental Buddhist teachings is impermanence in all things. However, in the case of Shan ordination and monastic life, Shan monks and lay people are suffering as social upheaval and political suppression are changing their traditional culture. As such, Shan communities warrant concern and deserve protection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as this essay has argued, although Shan Buddhist traditions, both in ritual and in practice, remain in the Shan community, the modern ordination ritual for young novices and the monastic life cycle are in danger of losing their ‘orthodoxy’ due to degeneration of social communication and political suppression. As we have seen, the novice ordination, Poy Sang Long festival, has been transformed from a religious event to a celebration of ethnicity. This is especially true in northern Thailand where the Shan community attempts to demonstrate the Shan identity through this event. Shans living overseas also report this phenomenon. Moreover, the way of doing monastic recitation, the Tham Vessantara-jātaka, indicates that social communication has degraded in the Shan community. Additionally, the training of the Zare culture shows the necessity of monastic education to protect Shan culture. Some might say that the transformation of the religious events and practice is an inevitable phenomenon as one of the fundamental Buddhist teachings is impermanence in all things. However, in the case of Shan ordination and monastic life, Shan monks and lay people are suffering as social upheaval and political suppression are changing their traditional culture. As such, Shan communities warrant concern and deserve protection.
Bibliography


End Notes

1 A Buddhist monk protects precepts in a monastery. The five precepts are (1) not taking life, (2) not taking what is not given, (3) no sexual misconduct, (4) no lying, (5) no consumption of intoxicants. The eight precepts are the five precepts with other three precepts: (6) not eating solid food after midday, (7) not adorning themselves or watching entertainment, (8) not using luxurious beds.

2 The Dhammācariya includes the study of Dhammasaṅgani and its commentary Atthasālinī; the Silakkhandhavagga-Pāli and its commentary the Sumanagalavilāsini; the Parājikakāṇḍa-Pāli and its commentary the Samantapāsādīkā.

3 The Tipitaka literally means ‘Three Baskets’. This includes monastic codes, (Vinaya pitaka), discourses (Suttapitaka) and higher doctrine (Abhidammapitaka).