

Informal Northern Thai Group Bulletin

May 6, 2013

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 - 1.2. The text of the talk.**
- 2. NEXT INTG MEETING : 360th Meeting : 13 May 2013 : “Beyond Tolerance, Working for Community Legal Education”. A Talk by Wendy Morrish, Director of the Community Legal Education Initiative, on community legal services in the Region.**
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- 1. MINUTES of the 359th Meeting, April 9, 2013 : “Tai Khuen culture, Burmanization and the 600th Anniversary of Songkran in Keng Tung”. A Talk and Presentation by Klemens Karlsson.**

1.1. PRESENT : Hans Bänziger, Saengdao Bänziger, Dianne Barber-Riley, Mark Barber-Riley, Bonnie Brereton, Jennifer Davis, Judith Donaldson, Dorothy Engmann, Louis Gabaude, Linith B. Gandionco, Yves Goudineau, Tammy Gouldstone, Deborah Greenaway, Carol Grodzins, Oliver Hargreave, Janet Illeni, Chuken Kanno, Jin Lam, Peter Maurer, Beryl M. McKeown, Jonathan McKeown, Rosakon Siriyuktanont, Paul Terhorst, Celeste Tolibas-Holland, Edward Tuyll, Renee Vines, Vithi Panichpant, Rebecca Weldon = A Total of 28 at least

1.2. The 359th Talk, April 9, 2013 : “Tai Khuen culture, Burmanization and the 600th Anniversary of Songkran in Keng Tung”. A Talk and Presentation by Klemens Karlsson.

My research has mainly been focused on Buddhist visual culture in South and Southeast Asia. I did my dissertation in Uppsala University, Sweden (Karlsson, 1999). It was about the so-called aniconic art in early Buddhism. I focused on the way early Pan-Indian sacred signs developed into symbolic signs representing the Buddha. This helped me realize that art and visual culture tells another story and can disclose things that elsewhere are hidden. There is a complex connection between visual signs and written or orally told stories. Buddhist visual culture does not only illustrate sacred texts, legends and doctrines. The reverse process may

also have occurred. Visual culture may have influenced the creation of stories, legends and doctrines in early Buddhism (Karlsson, 2006).

It is therefore my conviction that visual culture in the living religious tradition of Upper Southeast Asia also can disclose things that otherwise remained hidden. That's also the reason why I became interested in the culture of Tai Khuen and the city of Keng Tung and this is what I will speak about today.

I will focus on Tai Khuen culture and tell the story of two interesting statues that both disclose aspects of the ongoing Burmanization of Keng Tung. I will thereafter finish my talk with a short description about a recent project I am engaged in. It is about the Songkran Water Festival in Keng Tung and I will show some pictures from the celebration of its 600th Anniversary two years ago.

Tai Khuen culture

Keng Tung is the main city in the Eastern Shan State in Myanmar. The classical name of the city of Keng Tung is Tungapori and the name of the state is Khemarattha. The majority people living there call themselves Tai Khuen, but are often combined with the rest of the Tai people in the Shan State and almost always known as Shan or Tai Yai. But Tai Khuen has a unique culture more similar with Tai Yuan in Northern Thailand or Tai Lue in Sipsongbanna, than with the Shans in north and south Shan State of Myanmar.

Tai Khuen has a unique independent Buddhist sangha with 40 monasteries (Wat) in the township of Keng Tung (Karlsson, 2009). There is no official government control of the Khuen Sangha, and the head monk is elected by Khuen monks and prominent local lay persons. One of the unique aspects of Tai Khuen Buddhism is that they have their own Buddhist Canon and written in Khuen language and script. Another is the way Khuen Buddhist monks recite Pali texts. It differs in rhythm and intonations compared to the way Shan monks recite the same text. The recitation is more similar with Thai traditions. The religious calendar is also close to Thai traditions which mean that the Khuen do not celebrate full moon days at the same days as the Shan and Burmese.

Another significant feature of Tai Khuen Buddhist culture is its visual culture and special the architecture and design of Buddhist monasteries (Wat) (Karlsson, 2011). The Khuen monasteries in Keng Tung are quite distinct from a Shan and a Burmese monastery. Rather, they are closely related to monasteries in northern Thailand, Laos and Sipsongbanna. Khuen monasteries consist of a sacred compound with several buildings with the vihara, ubosot and stupa as the most important, just as those here in Chiang Mai. Gold stenciling on the inner walls and teakwood pillars are frequent in Tai Khuen viharas. Also noticeable features in Tai Khuen visual culture are the banners (tong) hanging from the ceiling in the monastery and the temple drums. The Shan monastery, in comparison, often consists of one solitary and multi-functional building on stilts. The floor is usually divided into three levels, each separated by a step of some 15-20 centimetres.

The reason for this unique Tai Khuen culture and its likeness with northern Thailand is of course the

historical connection between Keng Tung and LanNa. Keng Tung was established in the middle of the thirteenth century by King Mangrai from Chiang Mai. Keng Tung became a small autonomous or semi-autonomous city-state (muang) and their rulers have to come to Chiang Mai annually in order to pay tribute in the presence of the king. Buddhism was also established from Lan Na and is described in details in local chronicles.

Visual Culture and Burmanization – Mahamuni Buddha Statue

The Mahamuni (Maha Myat Muni) Buddha image of Keng Tung is situated in a temple hall in the center of the city and is a quite spectacular image. It is a huge golden Buddha, sitting on a throne in Burmese royal dress and regalia. It was made in the 1920s as a copy of one of the most famous Buddha images in Burma, the Mandalay Mahamuni Buddha, which is subject to extensive ritual veneration. The original Mahamuni Buddha in Mandalay was constructed in Arakan (Rakhine State), the western part of today's Myanmar. The mythical tradition places the construction of the Mahamuni statue as far back as the lifetime of the Buddha, but probably it is as old as the fifth century. A ritual is performed every morning at the temple in Mandalay, with monks washing and applying gold-leaf to the image. A similar but simpler variant of this ritual takes place every full and new moon at the Keng Tung Mahamuni statue. (Karlsson, 2009).

The image has been highly venerated throughout Burmese Buddhist history. Burmese political history of the eighteenth century, especially regarding the kingdom of Bodawpaya, has been closely connected to the Mahamuni Buddha image. In 1784, after his invasion of Arakan, he took the Mahamuni image to his new capital at Amarapura, in present-day Mandalay. It is today regarded by the Burmese as a national treasure. The making of the Mahamuni replica was made by the order of the Keng Tung ruler (Saopha), Sao Kawn Kiao Intaleng, together with the abbot of Wat Zaing Ngarm. As the original image is a prominent part of Burmese national identity, to copy the Mahamuni Buddha can be seen as an example of cultural Burmanization.

By the time the Mahamuni image was constructed, the country was under British rule and each Shan State enjoyed a measure of administrative independence as British protectorates. Keng Tung had also suffered three Siamese invasions between 1849 and 1854, repulsing them with Burmese and Shan aid. Chiang Mai was at that time a power in decay and dependent on Siam. As a result, Burmese influence in the area increased, and the ruler of Keng Tung turned his face towards the Burmese and ordered the copying of a Burmese Buddha and not one of the highly venerated Buddha images from northern Thailand.

Today, there is one specific piece of cloth that indicates that Burmese military leaders have symbolic control of the Mahamuni image. A baldachin of orange cloth is placed at the top of the head of the Buddha. A piece of blue cloth with the names of the present military commander in Chiang Tung and his wife are stuck on the baldachin. Every time a new commander takes office in Chiang Tung, a donation ritual is made, and the names on the baldachin are replaced.

The names on the baldachin imply that the military commander and his wife are the main donors contributing to the image and that everyone who enters the temple and donates flowers, food, or gold leaves does it under military protection. This symbolic control of the image manifests that all merit from veneration and donations made by ordinary people goes to the main donor, the present military commander. The statue legitimizing the political power of the present military government

It is therefore possible to say that the statue establishes a link with sacred Buddhist history, with the Buddha himself, but also with the Burmese history of military conquest. The history and myth of the Mahamuni Buddha is an example of the way art and visual culture can express ethnicity and political hegemony.

Visual Culture and Burmanization – The Pointing Buddha Statue

The Mahamuni statue was made nearly 100 hundred years ago and by the local Tai Khuen ruler. There are, however, more recent examples of the burmanizations of Keng Tung and the Eastern Shan State. The destruction of Keng Tung Palace 1991 is evidence of a more systematic burmanization that started in the beginning of the 1990s. At Tachilek, a border town close to Thailand, there is a copy of Yangon's famous Shwedagon Pagoda. It was built by the Burmese military government in 1993. Another example is a huge standing and pointing Buddha statue more than twenty meters tall from head to foot (Karlsson, 2012). It is illuminated in the evenings and can be seen from throughout the city. It was built by the Burmese military government and stand today as reminders of Burmese supremacy and sovereignty and as symbols of Burmese Buddhist legitimacy in a Shan and Tai Khuen area. The construction of the statue was made between 1998 and 2000 and was, according to the information plaque at its base, led by General Thein Sein and his wife, Daw Khin Khin Win.

Both the Pointing Buddha statue and the Tachilek Pagoda are constructed in the tradition of Burmese visual culture, with no or very little connection to Tai Khuen visual culture. Some examples of typically Burmese stylistic elements are the eight planetary shrines associated with the days of the week that are placed round the statue and temple. The Hamsa bird and a shrine for the legendary monk Upagupta are also examples of Burmese influence in the region.

The statue, with its outstretched, pointing hand, resembles a famous statue on Mandalay Hill. The Pointing Buddha at Mandalay was built by King Mindon in the mid-19th century. It is associated with Burmese nationalism and was part of King Mindon's sacred building program with the erection of a royal palace, city walls, pagodas, and monasteries during the establishment of his new capital, which he built in order to express his role as a Buddhist protector and cakravartin (universal ruler). The Pointing Buddha was the centerpiece of King Mindon's construction program as it connected with the Buddha himself and with his prophecy, portraying the king as the one who would rescue the country from the British and establish a golden Buddhist Empire.

In an attempt to establish a historical Burmese connection to the city, the information sign at the base of the

Standing Buddha indicates that the supposedly first Buddhist building on the hill, the Anawratha Pagoda, was made by an ancient Burmese king in the year 734 (according to the Burmese calendar, or 1372 CE). The pagoda must have been named for the pagan King Anawratha, one of the main rulers and conquerors who figures in Burmese history.

It is my firm believes that those who constructed the statue wanted to declare that Buddhism was introduced by the Burmese in this area, not by the Shan, Tai Khuen, or Lan Na. But we know from chronicles that Buddhism was introduced to the area by monks from Chiang Mai, and the city was established by a Tai king in the thirteenth century. The ruler in Keng Tung at that time was King Khaen Lek, the son of Chiang Mai ruler Ku Na. It was also the time of a Singhalese reformist order being established in Chiang Tung, after first having reached Sukhothai and Chiang Mai.

The image was struck by lightning not long after its construction. This and its connection to the Burmese military government, that it is constructed in the tradition of Burmese visual culture, and that it has a symbolic association of Burmese nationalism have made some people believed that it is a fake Buddha. Therefore, there are rumors that the statue is dangerous and ill-omened and some local people avoid walking near the statue because doing so, they believe, it may bring misfortune.

The 600th Anniversary of Songkran in Keng Tung

The Songkran festival is celebrated in April all over Southeast Asia with the splashing of water as an important element. The Songkran also marks the traditional New Year with water as a symbol of washing away all that is bad. In Keng Tung, however, the Songkran is also celebrated as a special local traditional event deeply embedded in the old history of the Tai Khuen people and the city Keng Tung. The festival in Keng Tung can be seen as a kind of performed history of Keng Tung and the Tai Khuen nation. It's performed every year for the survival and continued existence of the nation.

Several Khuen chronicles describe an event 600 years ago when Keng Tung suffered from an extreme drought. To bring relief, an astrologer advised the ruler to manufacture a frog on the bank of the Khuen River.

... we should fashion an image of Rahu the frog holding the moon in its mouth and build a sand cetiya covering it on the day the Sangkhan departs and a force of soldiers, elephants, horses, and sword-and-shield dancers to pay homage [to it] on the bank of the Khun river...

... the sky roared and so much rain fell that the lords had to run away from the rain to the shelter...

... this place is the excellent Earth of Victory, which would be a place of worship for all people in time to come...

(The Padaeng Chronicle §194-195 in: Saimong Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle* translated, 1981)

This text is the basis for how the Songkran festival is celebrated in Keng Tung. It is believed that the year 2011 marked the 600th anniversary of this event and therefore the Songkran was celebrated extraordinarily that year. Every year, however, some 40 men from the Tai Loi ethnic group come down to the city and play an important role in the festival. This is highlighted in a 24 hour drumming performance that goes on from noon one day and for the whole night until noon the next day. I will discuss the Tai Loi ethnic group later.

A temple drum and a male figure, called Bramar, are placed in the town centre. The figure and the creature he is sitting on are made by paper maché. The creature differs depending on the Khuen Calendar. In 2011 it was a horse, as the 2nd day of Songkran was on a Thursday. This year it will be a dragon. After a short recitation by a layman in front of the drum, the highest Burmese military commander starts the event with a symbolic drumming using a golden stick. Thereafter he walks slowly around the drum splashing water on it with a small twig. The real drumming starts by Tai Loi men during intense water splashing and continue until noon the next day.

In the morning the next day, just as it is told in the text, a frog is made by the riverside out of clay and mud. Thereafter, a female spirit from the mountain is invited to take up residence in the frog. The invitation is made by a layman and Buddhist monks reciting parts of Buddhavamsa Sutta and other texts. At noon the second day a huge procession makes its way toward the river with the drum and the male figure. This procession is the most popular event of the whole festival. Thousands of people are watching the parade in the streets and a huge mass of people follows the parade on foot all the way to the river. Well at the river a kind of chaos ensues as young men try to catch some of the remnants of the frog and the male figure. This will bring them prosperity and wealth the New Year to come.

The procession that accompanies the drum to the river is called “sending the drum”. But a generation ago it was called “sending the phallus” instead. It is generally believed that before Saopha Intraleng reformed the ritual in 1897 it was a large phallus that was brought to the female frog spirit by the river. This was also the time when the British visited the town and it is easy to speculate that it was the prudish foreigners who would substitute the phallus for a drum.

The next day people fetch sand from the river in plastic buckets and build sand stupas at the monasteries. They also venerate the spirit of the river (Nat Nam) with small cakes made of sticky rice, peanuts and sesame seeds wrapped in banana leaves.

We have already seen that some 40 Tai Loi men have a leading role in the performance. Before Tai people populated upland Southeast Asia, the Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic groups Wa and Lua/Lawa were dominant in the region and occupied the valleys. Tai Loi is usually translated as “hill Tai” but they are also called Wan Ku, meaning “those who were left behind”. This is because they are believed to be the remnants of the Wa or Lua/Lawa tribe that were left behind in the mountains around Keng Tung when the Tai people came and occupied the fertile valleys and expelled the earlier inhabitants.

The Tai Loi have traditionally also been part of the Saopha coronation ceremony in Keng Tung. A Tai Loi

chief was placed on a throne and given a meal to eat before they were symbolically driven out of the country and the Khuen ruler took his place on the throne. The last time this ritual was performed was during the coronation of Prince Sao Kawn Kiao Intaleng in 1897. Therefore, both the coronation ceremony and the Songkran water festival can be seen as cultural performances of ancient Tai Khuen history of sovereignty, power and national identity.

In the mountains halfway between Keng Tung and the Chinese border there are a couple of Tai Loi villages with some exceptionally beautiful temples. The Tai Loi in these villages are living in longhouses. It has been assumed that the temple of Baan Sean was built in the 15th century during the prosperous period of the Lanna Kingdom. The smaller temple at Baan Niat is also impressive. These temples were built on the trade route between Keng Tung and Sipsongbanna. Because of political changes and new routes they were left in the mountains well preserved by the villagers. In contrast to the monasteries in Keng Tung they have not been rebuilt and modernized during the centuries. The architecture of the buildings reminds one of a northern Tai cultural landscape including the Eastern Shan State in Myanmar, Sipsongbanna in Yunnan, and northern Laos and Thailand.

Publications

- Karlsson, Klemens. *Face to Face with the Absent Buddha: The Formation of Buddhist Aniconic Art*. Vol. 15, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1999. <http://publications.uu.se/theses/abstract.xsql?dbid=421>
- Karlsson, Klemens. "The Formation of Early Buddhist Visual Culture", *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 2:1 (2006): 68-95. DOI: 10.2752/174322006778053906
- Karlsson, Klemens. "Tai Khun Buddhism and Ethnic-Religious Identity" *Contemporary Buddhism* 10:1 (2009): 93-101. DOI: 10.1080/14639940902968939
- Karlsson, Klemens. "Shan Ethnic-Religious Identity: Objects, Art, and Material Religion in the Eastern Shan State", Montira Rato, Khanidtha Kanthavichai (eds.) *Shan and Beyond: Essays on Shan Archaeology, Anthropology, History, Politics, Religion and Human Rights*: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2011. P. 117-124.
- Karlsson, Klemens. "Material Religion and Ethnic Identity: Buddhist Visual Culture and the Burmanization of the Eastern Shan State", Julius Bautista (ed.), *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012. P. 61-77

NOTE: At posting time, Klemens Karlsson is being treated at Chiang Mai Ram Hospital for a bacterial blood infection. We wish him a quick recovery.

2. NEXT INTG MEETING : 360th Meeting : TUESDAY 14 May 2013, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai : "Beyond Tolerance, Working for Community Legal Education". A Talk by Wendy Morrish, Co-Director of Bridges Across Borders South East Asia Community Legal Education

Presentation of the talk

The presentation will illustrate a model of clinical legal education (CLE) that advocates for law students and faculty to stand in solidarity with those who are 'othered'. It promotes a form of law education that builds capacity within law students and faculty to move beyond notions of tolerance, acceptance and respect by affirming the 'other' and standing in solidarity with them so they can access justice. A salient goal of the model is to unlearn oppression, stigma and discrimination, taking a stance to help indigent and vulnerable communities access justice.

The Speaker

Wendy Morrish is co-director of **Bridges Across Borders South East Asia Community Legal Education (BABSEA CLE)** and works with law faculties throughout Southeast Asia to take a much more active role in learning and reflecting upon the relationship of the law and needs of communities where injustice, inequity and exclusion are situated.

3. FUTURE INTG MEETINGS (7:30 p.m. at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai)

360th Meeting : 14 May 2013 : “Beyond Tolerance, Working for Community Legal Education”. A Talk by Wendy Morrish, Director of the Community Legal Education Initiative, on community legal services in the Region

361st Meeting : 11 June 2013 : “Coping with HIV in Adolescence: the Situation in Thailand”. A Talk by Dr. Sophie Le Cœur, Institut National d’Études Démographiques (INED) & Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), France + Program for HIV Prevention and Treatment, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

4. MAILING PROBLEMS

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5. INTG CONTACTS : Convenor - Secretary - Website

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2) **Secretary : Louis Gabaude** : e-mail : <gabaudel@yahoo.com>. Mobile : 087 188 50 99.

3) **INTG Website** : <http://www.intgcm.thehostserver.com>

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**Beyond
Tolerance:
Working for
Community Legal
Education**

A Talk by **Wendy Morrish**

Tuesday 14 May 2013 : 19:30

At the **ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE – Chiang Mai**

138, Charoen Prathet Road, Opposite Wat Chaimongkhon & EFEO

Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)

28 years of Talks!

**Coping
with HIV in
Adolescence:
the Situation
in Thailand**

A Talk by Sophie Le Cœur, MD

Tuesday 11 June 2013 : 19:30

At the ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE – Chiang Mai

138, Charoen Prathet Road, Opposite Wat Chaimongkhon & EFEO