Lowland Festivities in a Highland Society: Songkran in the Palaung Village of Pang Daeng Nai, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the celebration of Songkran in the Palaung village of Pang Daeng Nai in northern Thailand. The Palaung, a Mon-Khmer speaking people from Burma, have a long tradition of Theravada Buddhism which can be seen in a number of rituals and ceremonies associated with Songkran. While the Palaung have acquired both Buddhism and the Songkran festival from neighboring lowland populations, many practices and beliefs have taken on a local character in the process of transmission. In my paper, I discuss the similarities and differences between Palaung and lowland Tai Songkran ritual observances, particularly with regards to the annual song krau ceremony, a village-wide exorcism/blessing which coincides with the festival.

Key words: Songkran festival, Song krau ceremony, Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

“True ‘Hill People’ are never Buddhists” (Leach, 1960). So wrote Edmund Leach in a paper describing the differences between highland minority groups in Burma and their lowland Tai2 and Burmese neighbors. This understanding of highlander culture is widespread and most studies on highland religion use Buddhism simply as grounds for comparison or ignore its influence on highland traditions altogether. In fact, both highlanders and lowlanders share an “animistic” worldview (Spiro, 1967; Terweil, 1994), but it is not my intention to deny that Theravada Buddhism, a ubiquitous facet of life in the lowlands, is largely absent from highland cultures. What I wish to examine is the anomalous case of the Palaung, a highland people who, as one early observer notes, are “fervent professing Buddhists” (Scott and Hardiman, 1900). In particular, I will focus on the rites and ceremonies surrounding the

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1This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in 2003 during the completion of a Master of Anthropology degree at Simon Fraser University, Canada. I would like to thank the Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai for welcoming me into their village, particularly Lung Kham and his family, with whom I lived. Thanks are also due to the Humanities Academic Center of Chiang Mai University and my supervisors at Simon Fraser University, professors Michael Howard and Michael Kenny. I would particularly like to thank my late friend A-Rot, whose help and companionship made my research possible.

2I use the term Tai here to denote the larger ethnolinguistic category, which includes Thai, Shan, and Laotians. The term “Thai” is used to refer to the particular Tai group which predominates in the country of Thailand.
Songkran festival in the village of Pang Daeng Nai, Thailand, to see how other Tai cultural institutions have penetrated the fabric of Palaung culture alongside the beliefs and practices of Theravada Buddhism.

Introducing the Palaung

The term “Palaung” is of Burmese origin and refers to a group of Mon-Khmer speaking people occupying the areas of south-western China, the old Shan states of Burma, and the province of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The Palaung speak a language belonging to the Eastern Palaungic sub-branch of the Northern Mon-Khmer Palaungic languages (Grimes, 1996). They may be divided into three main groups, based on linguistic and cultural differences: the Shwe (also known as Golden Palaung or Ta-ang), the Pale (also known as Silver Palaung, Di-Ang, or Ngwe Palaung), and the Rumai. There are approximately 600,000 Palaung in Burma and 12,000 in China. Of these, approximately 200,000 to 300,000 are Pale speakers (Grimes, 1996). Only the Pale are found in northern Thailand where they number between 2,000 and 3,000.

Unlike most highland groups in the area, the Palaung maintain a long tradition of Theravada Buddhist practices and beliefs. Leslie Milne, author of the sole in-depth study of Palaung culture, writes that Buddhism was introduced to the Palaung in 1782 CE when “Mang-ta-ra Gyi—Mindaya Gyi, better known as Bodawpaya King of Burma—sent a Buddhist monk to Tawngpeng to introduce Buddhism among the Palaung” (Milne, 1924). She believes, however, that the Palaung knew of Buddhism before this time since it had been introduced to the Shan in adjacent states over two centuries earlier.

Howard and Wattanapun (2001) point out that the Palaung have a history of being influenced by both the Shan and Burmese schools of Buddhism. Both forms are found among the Palaung in Burma, with groups living in the north primarily influenced by the Burmese school, and the others, including the Silver Palaung, influenced by what Dodd (1923) calls the “Yuan” form of Buddhism. “Yuan” Buddhism is found throughout the Tai-speaking lands of northern Thailand, Laos, southern China and the Shan State of Kengtung from where the Palaung living in Thailand migrated (Keyes, 1971). It differs from the Central Thai and Burmese Buddhist traditions in its religious script, the structure of its rituals and the organization of its clergy.

Palaung in Northern Thailand

The Palaung living in northern Thailand refer to themselves as the “Dara’ang,” which means “people of the mountain.” Like many ethnic minority groups who migrated from

1 conducted fieldwork in Pang Daeng Nai from January to May of 2003. Numerous trips to the village were also made during the period of August 2002 to January 2003 and May to August 2003 to attend religious festivals, conduct further interviews, and check data.

2 The term “Palaung” is used throughout the paper. I decided against using the term “Dara-ang” as both the villagers and outsiders use the term Palaung and it is the name most people are familiar with. Furthermore, unlike some other ascribed ethnic names, it does not carry a pejorative meaning. It is also unclear whether or not this word is used by all Palaung peoples or is only used by the Palaungs from Loi Lae. It should also be remembered that only Silver Palaung (Pale) live in Northern Thailand.
Burma to Thailand in the last two centuries, the Palaung were fleeing increasingly-detrimental conditions brought on by political, ethnic and drug-related power struggles (Howard and Wattanapun, 2001). Most Palaung living in Thailand come from a group of six villages (Nalang, Makuntok, Huay tum, Nam Hu, Song Ta and Pang Yong) located on Loi Lae (Lae Mountain) in the south-eastern region of Shan State, Burma. In 1984, 168 Palaung men and women crossed the Burmese border into Thailand and settled on Doi Angkang (Angkang Mountain), founding the village of Nor Lae. Today there exist three Palaung settlements in Fang district (Nor Lae, Mae Leam and Suan Cha) and four settlements in Chiang Dao district (Mae Chon, Huai Pong, Pang Daeng Nok and Pang Daeng Nai). All villages are within the boundaries of Chiang Mai province.

Pang Daeng Nai, the location of my fieldwork, is a small village located in Chiang Dao district of Chiang Mai province, approximately ten kilometers east of the district center. The village was founded in 1985 by a group of Palaung migrating from nearby Mae Chon on 12 rai of land, purchased from a local Lahu man. When it was founded, the village (known then simply as Pang Daeng or “the place of red ground”) was comprised of only 12 households (Shila, 1993). By 2003, it had grown to 49 households and 241 people.

After its founding, Pang Daeng Nai was quick to construct a space for communal Buddhist ceremonies. As in Burma, the monastery is located at the edge of the village. In Pang Daeng Nai, the temple grounds consists of an old, slit bamboo temple that now serves as an common eating area; a new temple containing the Buddha images where sermons are held; the *sira saay* (a wooden post tapered at the tip, surrounded by a fence); a spirit house for the temple guardian spirit (*jaw thi*); and a monks’ residents, consisting of two raised houses. Recently, a small building for general living was constructed next to the monks’ quarters. This was built in response to the newly-arrived Palaung monk who has taken up residence in Pang Daeng Nai. The grounds also contain a number of toilets, storage sheds and a tank of water for drinking and washing.

In addition to the temple, each household contains a family altar devoted to Buddhism. The household altar is known as the *yang phra*, which means “a place (or thing) of Buddhist images.” Palaung commonly place a poster or statue of the Buddha, photos of other famous monks, an image of the king of Thailand (past and present), a photo of a novice from the village, flowers, bowls for offerings, incense, candles, and a poster or statue of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung (a popular monk in northern Thailand) on or near the altar. The altar itself may consist of a simple platform or a more elaborate armoire. It is always located in a raised spot somewhere inside the elevated section of the main living area.

Pang Daeng Nai also contains a number of non-Buddhist structures and sites. At the center of the village is a post known as the *ho teur*. The *ho teur* of Pang Daeng Nai resembles

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5“Loi” being Shan for “mountain.” The Northern Thai word is “Doi.”

61 rai = 1600 square metres

7Milne gives prescriptions for the direction of the altar based on the day the household owner was born (Milne, 1924). This is not practised in Pang Daeng Nai, and the altar can face whichever way is convenient. This may reflect space restraints in the village, which also prevent a strict adherence to the proper direction a house should face.
quite closely the \textit{lak muang}, widespread among Tai groups (Terweil, 1978), and it is possible that the form was borrowed from the Tai. The term \textit{“ho teur,”} however, is a Palaung word meaning “prime post,” and given the pervasiveness of central village markers amongst Southeast Asian cultures, it is likely that the practice predates the Tai form in some way or another. The \textit{ho teur} houses a guardian spirit, but it is nameless and not propitiated.\footnote{For the Tai, a human sacrifice myth describing a person or group of people buried beneath the central post is often associated with the protector spirits of the post (see Terweil, 1978). In the case of the Palaung \textit{ho teur}, it is more accurate to say a spirit is implicit within the post, in a more abstract sense than the other spirits commonly propitiated in and around the village.}

The \textit{ho teur} becomes the center of activity only once a year, during the \textit{song krau} ceremony discussed below.

To the north of the village is the residence of the \textit{tsao muang}, or “lord of the village.” The shrine comes into play twice a year at the spirit-feeding (\textit{hiang karnam}) ceremonies held just before and just after the Buddhist Lent season (\textit{pansa}). While the \textit{tsao muang} shrines are found in nearly every Palaung village, the term appears to be a Shan derivative, \textit{“tsao”} meaning “lord” and \textit{“muang”} meaning “land” or “territory” (Cushing, 1914). Another communal spirit shrine is dedicated to \textit{karnam u’m} (“spirit of the water”). This shrine is located one kilometer south-east of the village, next to the river that supplies drinking water to the village. This shrine resembles the \textit{tsao muang}, except that it is comprised of only one house. It is also much newer, being built in 1996 in conjunction with the Upland Holistic Development Project’s (UHDP) construction of a system of pipes, water filtration and water-storage tanks within the village.

**Religious Specialists**

There are two ritual specialist roles in Pang Daeng Nai: the \textit{ajaan} and the \textit{da bu muang}. The \textit{ajaan} is the lay Buddhist specialist, responsible for overseeing all Buddhist ceremonies. These include sermons held at the temple, ceremonial chanting by monks done at villagers’ homes and the annual \textit{song krau} ritual, coinciding with the Songkran festival. Beside overseeing the preparations for the ceremonies, the \textit{ajaan} leads the congregation in reading certain religious texts. Within the village, this position is presently filled by A-Tan, who goes by the name Tama while he is functioning in the role. In Pang Daeng Nai, a man has to have been a full monk to be qualified for the position of \textit{ajaan}.

The \textit{da bu muang} is the spirit specialist, responsible for ceremonies dealing with spirits such as the biannual feeding of the village guardian spirit (\textit{tsao muang}) and the annual feeding of the water spirit (\textit{karnam u’m}). He also assists with weddings and household exorcisms. In Pang Daeng Nai, an elderly man named Lung Yok fills this role. While the position is not necessarily hereditary, it generally functions this way as fathers instruct sons on the proper ritual techniques.

One other position usually found in Palaung villages is that of the \textit{hsara}. This man typically conducts exorcisms and seances for healing illnesses caused by spirits. Pang Daeng Nai does not have a \textit{hsara}. There is one active \textit{hsara} in nearby Pang Daeng Nok, but I have
never heard of anyone from Pang Daeng Nai going to him for treatment. When questioned about this fact, the villagers say they go to the hospital when sick, or buy medicine in the market. In Burma, the *hsara* was also consulted on a number of other matters, such as the direction of a house or the proper day to set forth on a journey (Milne, 1924). These particularities are no longer of much interest to the Palaung living in Thailand.

It is significant that all the above terms used to describe ritual specialists come from lowland cultures. “Ajaan” is a common Tai word used in reference to high-level instructors, likely deriving from the Sanskrit term *acarya* (Terweil, 1994). The term *hsara* comes from the Burmese term *hsaya*, meaning “teacher” (Milne, 1924). Spiro likewise notes that the term “*hsaya*” is used in Burmese as a suffix when referring to any expert (Spiro, 1967). Finally, the term *da bu muang* may be related to the Shan term “*phu muong*” reported by Durrenberger (1980) and Tannenbaum (1995). Tannenbaum notes that it is the duty of the *phu muong* to “keep the compound [spirit shrine] clean, place regular offerings made to the Tsao Muong, supervise his annual or semi-annual feasts, and act as the intermediary for villagers” (Tannenbaum, 1995). She further notes that the *phu muong* is a “young man. Because the job involves killing chickens, when the *phu muong* gets older and actively keeps the five precepts, he will turn the job over to a younger man” (Tannenbaum, 1995). The *da bu muang* of Pang Daeng Nai is an older man and it is possible that the term “*da*,” meaning “grand father,” reflects this difference between the Shan and Palaung position.

**Songkran Festival**

Like most villages in Burma, Thailand and Laos, the Palaung celebrate Songkran, a festival to mark the start of the traditional new year. The festival likewise takes place in Palaung villages across Thailand, Burma and Yunnan. Milne (1924) mentions little about the festival concerning the Palaung in Burma, save the following:

At the beginning of the water-feast in April, children pour water on the hands of their parents and the parents wash their faces with their wet hands. This is a ceremonial washing and when it is finished, the parents with their children carry bamboo joints full of water, in order to pour it over the images in the court of the monastery. All images of the Buddha that are not too heavy are carried out of the image-house for the occasion, and all day a long procession of people of all ages may be seen climbing the hill from the spring or stream. They pour the water over the images, then go down the hill again for more (Milne, 1924).

Milne (1924) does not make mention of the water throwing that accompanies the festivities in Burma and Thailand or the *song krau* ritual, but it may be that she did not herself witness the festival, as she often returned to Mandalay before the start of the rainy season.

Today, Songkran (known as Thingyan in Burma) is best known for its riotous water throwing and drunkenness. In Chiang Mai, this water throwing is taken to exorbitant

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9In 1889 the Thai (then Siamese) government officially designated April 1 as New Year’s Day. This was changed in 1940 to January 1, in accordance with the West. Palaungs living in Thailand celebrate both Songkran and January 1 as New Year’s festivals, but only Songkran is imbued with religious significance.
proportions, as thousands of people line the moat to fish buckets of water with which to douse any passer-by. While water throwing and drinking is also found in Palaung villages (especially among the younger generations), Pang Daeng Nai retains several of the more traditional practices and many villagers still recognize the occasion as a sacred time of the year. The fact that water is scarce in the village at this time of year helps to keep the rowdiness to a minimum.

In the past, abstaining from alcohol was one of ten prohibitions associated with Songkran. According to Palaung elders, during the festival the following prohibitions apply from sunrise to sunset: no killing, no making yourself beautiful, no singing or dancing, no cutting down trees, no sex, no commercial activity, no displays of greed, no fighting, no getting tattoos and no taking intoxicants. These prohibitions are similar to those described by Htin Aung (1959) for the Burmese.

The New Year’s Day and the actual period of the Water Festival, notwithstanding its riotous merry-making, are considered very auspicious, and people endeavour specially not to break the Five Precepts, and also to refrain from cutting down trees and plants, assaulting people and beating animals, weeping and wailing, blood-letting, eating oil and spices, transacting goods and money, and sending out heralds, envoys, agents, and messengers (Htin Aung, 1959).

Today, only a few men and women still follow these prescriptions. Those that do are mostly older men and women. For younger Palaung, Songkran is an occasion to attend celebrations in Chiang Dao, relax, and party late into the night.

The word “Songkran” is derived from the Sanskrit term sankranta (Rajadhon, 1961). Songkran corresponds with the vernal equinox, and represents one of the few festivals that are fixed according to the solar rather than lunar calendar; a solar connection that is reflected in its origin myths. The fact that the festival begins at the height of the dry season and the commencement of the agricultural (rainy) season and it involves water in various forms has led some authors, including Sir James Frazer (1913), to suggest that the festival is associated with rain-making rituals. Whether this was once the case, the association between rain calling and Songkran is not made by the villagers of Pang Daeng Nai.

The Palaung themselves do not have their own myth concerning the festival, and recount an abbreviated version of the lowland myths. In the Thai Songkran myth, the god Kabil Maha Phrom (Kapila being Sanskrit for Red) was jealous of a certain young man’s cleverness. He proposed three riddles to the man on the wager that if he guessed right within seven days, the god would lose his head, but if he guessed wrong, he himself would be decapitated. While he sought the answers, he stopped at the foot of a tall tree where he heard a mother eagle relating the story of the wager to her children. Upon learning the answers, he sought out Maha Phrom who, hearing the correct answers to the riddles, decapitated himself. His head was very hot, and if it touched the earth the oceans would dry up and the fields would burn. To prevent this, the god’s seven daughters carried their father’s head to a cave, where each year one of the seven brings it out for a procession around Mount Meru (Rajadhon, 1986).
The “seven goddesses” are known in Thailand as the seven women of Songkran. Each of them is associated with a certain day of the week: Sunday is Tungsa, Monday is Koraka, Tuesday is Raksos, Wednesday is Mondha, Thursday is Kirinee, Friday is Kiminia, and Saturday is Mahotorn. Depending on the year, the Songkran woman rides one of eight mounts (garuda, tiger, pig, goat, elephant, water, buffalo, peacock). As Rajadhon explains:

She stands on the animal’s back if she comes in the morning, rides on its back if she comes in the afternoon, reclines with her eyes open if she comes in the evening, and reclines with her eyes closed if she comes past midnight. All these are based on calculations made by court astrologers. . . Every year before the advent of Songkran, the royal astrologer will present his calculations to the king giving all the traditional information as predicted by the calculations of the coming year. The artist attached to the court will also paint a picture based on the above information, showing the Songkran Lady and the celestial procession of the god’s head (Rajadhon, 1956).

While this is no longer a court practice, travelling medicine men still hock these calendars in the countryside. Several of the villagers in Pang Daeng Nai purchased a one-page farmer’s almanac depicting a painting of this year’s sister carrying her father’s head.

The Songkran festival itself takes place over a three- or four-day period in Pang Daeng Nai (see figure 1). The first day of the festival (April 13th) is known as wan sangkhan long. In Pang Daeng Nai, Buddha images are brought out of the temple and bathed with water on this day. The second day of the festival (April 14th) is known as wan naw, or “day in between.” On this day, people travel to the houses of their parents and elders to wash their hands and ask forgiveness for any offences they may have committed throughout the year. The third day (April 15th) is phaya wan, the “prince of days,” and is the first day of the new year. A sermon is held on this day at the local temple. In addition to these three days, a communal song krau (sending away bad fortune) ceremony is conducted on wan sin yaay\(^{10}\) corresponding closest with the festival.

$$\begin{array}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{April 13}^\text{th} & \text{April 14}^\text{th} & \text{April 15}^\text{th} & \text{April 16}^\text{th} \\
\hline
\text{Bathing of the Buddha} & \text{Paying respect to elders} & \text{Sermon conducted at local temple} & \text{Song krau ceremony} \\
\text{Construction of sand chedi} & & \text{Pay respect to provincial governor} & \\
\hline
\end{array}$$

**Figure 1. Days of Songkran (Pang Daeng Nai).**

**Bathing the Buddha**

The bathing of the Buddha images is one of the most important rites of Songkran. The act is commonly held in conjunction with the pouring water over the abbot of the local temple,

\(^{10}\)“Wan” meaning “day,” and “sin” meaning “precept” in Thai. There are four wan sin a month, observed on the full, new, and half moons. Those on full and new moons are known as wan sin yaay (“large precept day”) and those on half moons as wan sin noy (“small precept day”).
but as Pang Daeng Nai lacked any resident monks at the time the rite took place in 2003, the Buddha images were bathed alone. On the first day of Songkran (April 13th), several of the smaller Buddha images are brought to the bathing place outside the temple. Since coming to Thailand, the procession of the Buddha images to the bathing platform has not been elaborate. Before the images are deposited, they are carried clockwise by hand three times around the temple to the accompaniment of drums (khreugen), gongs (go mo), and firecrackers. An umbrella is held symbolically over the images, a traditional sign of high status. After three rounds, the images are brought to a platform. The elders recall that the procession was much more elaborate in Burma, with the images being carried on platforms and many more participants.

In past years, the platform was comprised of a small house structure raised on four posts. It was constructed primarily of bamboo, with a two-tiered thatch roof, and four baskets on each corner to receive offerings. Villagers would bring water in the form of small bamboo cups or glasses and pour the water over the images. In Burma, the production was more elaborate, involving a spinning water wheel. As this structure had not been built since arriving in Thailand, the village headman decided in 2003 to construct one for the benefit of the younger generation. The structure in its entirety is known as a ho son u’m and is pointed to as being particularly “Palaung” by the villagers. The surrounding Northern Thai villages do not construct like devices, though Rajadhon (1986) mentions that in “the northeast provinces (of Thailand) they make the trough with bamboo, at the end of which is a device like a miniature water-wheel which works as a spray”.

The main feature of the ho son u’m is a top-like device, approximately 80 cm tall known as a nong ka’bat u’m. Shaped like a top, it consists of seven bamboo spokes fastened to a central bamboo piece. The central piece (10 cm in diameter) is hollow, but left plugged approximately 15 cm from the top. The seven spokes have a diameter of approximately 5 cm each. They are hollowed out and attached at the top of the central bamboo post at a 70 degree angle to the cylinder. Another hollowed-out bamboo spoke is attached to the end of each spoke, connecting it with the base of the central bamboo piece. In each of these additional pieces, three or four small holes are punctured at right angles. Finally, the bottom of the central cylinder is carved into a point. When water is poured in the top of the nong ka’bua’um, it travels through the spokes, is stopped by the plug 15 cm down, and then forced out the holes, causing the device to spin.

The nong kra’bat u’m is fixed upon a roofed platform, which stands approximately three meters high from base to tip. The platform itself is approximately three meters squared and is covered by a thatched roof. A small fence, also constructed of bamboo, surrounds the platform. Such fences are commonly built around sacred spaces, such as chanting monks, the village temple or the local shrine. Baskets are attached on each of the corners, where

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11There are two types of drums used in Pang Daeng Nai. A smaller drum (face at 27cm diameter, length at 75 cm), known as the khreugen tiam, which is made in the village, and a larger drum (face is 27 cm, length is 160 cm), known as a khreugen token, which is purchased in Mae Sai.

Gongs likewise vary in size. The bigger ones, 30 cm in diameter, are known as go mo tong, while the smaller ones, approximately 15 cm in diameter, are known as go mo tiak. Both are purchased in Mae Sai.
offerings to the Buddha images are placed. Throughout the festival men, women, and
children fill these baskets with offerings of flowers, sweets, candles, incense and puffed rice.

Next to the platform is a ramp, known as the jek u’m, where people climb and pour their
water down a conduit constructed from three meters of bamboo half-pipe. The final part of
the ho son u’m is the galay u’m. This piece is fixed above the nong ka’bat u’m. It consists of
a hollowed-out block of teak, approximately one meter long, carved into the shape of a boat.
In days past, this piece was carved to the likeness of a ma-krai (naga), but in 2003 took the
form of a hollowed-out boat-shape. On the bottom of the galay u’m is a fixed tube that fits
into the hollow top of the nong kra’bat u’m.

Once assembled, people climb the ramp and pour water down the conduit. The water
flows through a cloth filter and then into the galay u’m. The cloth filter is necessary as many
people pour fragrant water containing Acacia concinna pods, which would otherwise clog up
the galay u’m. Water collects in the hollowed-out interior of the galay u’m, then flows down
the central tube into the nong kra’bat u’m. The water is then forced out the small holes along
the rods and spins the nong kra’bat u’m in a clockwise direction. As the water flows over the
Buddha images, people collect it in glasses and bring it back to their home to sprinkle over
their heads and houses. The water is seen as charged with beneficial power that can purify
and protect that which it is sprinkled upon.

According to Kham, the village headman, the nong ka’bat u’m was designed back in
Burma to allow users to enjoy the water longer. Water was scarce at this time of the year, and
people had to carry it a great distance from the river to the temple. He recounts that in the
olden days, the nong ka’bat u’m used to spin constantly. “If you wanted to make bun [merit],
you had to make the nong kra’bat u’m spin. If it didn’t spin, you made baap [de-merit].” He
laments that although people have water readily available in their homes, they are too lazy to
make the water wheel spin much.

Chedis made of Sand

Just behind the ho son u’m lies an area known as the sira saay (saay meaning “sand” in
Thai). This area consists of a small, wooden stick, resembling the central village post. The
stick is enclosed by a small fence and surrounded by nine piles of dirt, each with a paper flag
in the shape of a fish and a Thai zodiac banner stuck in it. Each household brings a bit of earth
from their home and places a bit on each pile. One man told me that this was done to carry
mis-fortune from the house to the temple. This keeps well with the theme of cleansing that is
pervasive throughout the Songkran. Most people, however, simply say it is a way to make
merit (bun).12

12Merit or bun constitutes the active force behind the karmic cycle of rebirth. Simply put, good acts bring you
bun, while evil acts get you baap (or de-merit). A person with a large store of bun can look forward to a future
life in which they are beautiful and rich. In addition to the future, as several authors have pointed out that many
people expect the merit they make in this life to help them here and now (Keyes, 1983; Terwiel, 1994). In
popular religion, it may be best to consider merit as a beneficial force accumulated through good deeds,
religious observances, and being in contact with sacred objects. This beneficial power aids the maker both in
this life and the next.
Sand *chedis* are a common site at many Northern Thai temple grounds, though often there is but one large sand *chedi*. Rajadhon (1986) describes a similar practice among the central Thai of constructing “phrachedisai” or “sand *chedi*”, which takes place during Songkran. “The merit makers will then fetch sand in the silver bowls which they have brought along with them and carry them to the ceremonial ground and start building a sand pagoda—something like a pyramid” (Rajadhon, 1986). The *sira saay* also becomes important during *khao pansa* when the hair of the village novices are shaved and placed on a banana leaf inside the small fence. At this time, the remaining dirt brought to make *chedis* is used to weigh down the hair.

**Forgiveness and Blessing**

On the second day of Songkran (April 14th) Palaung men and women travel to the houses of elders to pay respect and ask forgiveness. This act, known as *khan taw*, involves bringing offerings to the elders, and kneeling to bring one’s forehead to touch the ground. People routinely *khan taw* monks, Buddha images, and *chedis*. Three times a year (*khao pansa, awk pansa,* and *Songkran*) people *khan taw* their parents, grandparents, and other elderly relatives. Some people *khan taw* the village headman on these occasions too. Many people return to the village of their parents for this day (if they are in Thailand), and return later in the evening. Palaung living in Thailand also participate in an annual procession to wash the hands of the provincial governor in Chiang Mai City. A similar event is performed for the district head in Chiang Dao on April 17th by representatives from villages around Chiang Dao district.

In Pang Daeng Nai, villagers generally *khan taw* their elders in the morning. While people are expected to dress in nice clothes, it is difficult to keep a dignified look as children and siblings are anxious to douse each other with water as they arrive at the houses of elders. They bring with them the offerings they will present and bottles of fragrant *sompoy* water, containing *Acacia concinna* pods. The offerings can be of various kinds, including flowers, sweets, and shoulder bags (*woh*). Nowadays, it is common to see people present elders with pre-packaged buckets of supplies bought in Chiang Dao. These buckets are of the type generally given to monks and contain a variety of domestic supplies, such as detergent, matches, soap, toothpaste, noodles, canned food, and fish sauce.

If the offerings are small, the givers place them on a tray and, raising the offering to their head, present it to the elder using both hands. The elders or monks are always seated in a higher position, denoting their higher status. In the Palaung-style houses, this involves elders seated on the raised section of the floor, while members of the younger generations sit on the lower section. Larger offerings, such as those contained within buckets, forgo with the trays. Those who have come to *khan taw* sit hands folded in prayer position, while the elder touches the offerings and recites a blessing (*bang pon*). The gifts act as a medium through which the blessing travels in the same way that offerings to monks act as a medium through which merit is transferred to the laity. The blessings wish prosperity, health, and happiness upon all those who have come to perform *khan taw*.

The blessing culminates with the elder sprinkling the crowd with water. The younger generation then washes the elders’ hands with *sompoy* water. This is done to wash away any
offences that might have been committed, intentionally or unintentionally, throughout the year. White strings are often tied around the wrists of children and some adults as a further protection against illness and accident. This practice is common among lowland Tai cultures and is commonly associated with binding the *khwan* to the body (Tambiah, 1970; Terweil, 1994; Tannenbaum, 1995). Milne (1924) reported a similar concept of “soul” among the Palaung of Nahmsan, where “in illness some parts of the *kar-bu* are in any case out of the body” (Milne, 1924). The Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai do not generally think of the *karphraw* (spirit) as being divisible. Consequently, the white thread is seen more as a protective barrier than a binding force.

**Sending Away Misfortune**

One of the most important communal rites associated with Songkran in Pang Daeng Nai is the annual *song krau* ceremony. *Song* is a Tai term for “send.” The word *krau* is derived from the Sanskrit term *graha*, which Davis (1984) translates as “adversity.” Davis writes that in the Northern Thai context, *khau* [krau] denotes the celestial bodies which are responsible for human misfortunes. These celestial bodies are the 27 *rksa* marking the days in the moon’s passage around Mount Sineru, and more particularly, the *navagraha* or nine celestial deities. These deities are the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu, and Ketu. The latter two are personifications of the ascending and descending nodes, or the points of intersection of the lunar and solar tracks. Of the nine, Rahu is chieftain and the most dangerous (Davis, 1985).

The *song krau* ceremony, also known as *satuang* among the Northern Thai, is often held as a healing rite among the Northern Thai and Lawa of northern Thailand (Rajadhon, 1958; Kauffmann, 1977). Small-scale *song krau* ceremonies are likewise performed by the Palaung for ailing people, when a grave misfortune has been visited on a household, or as a preventative measure against future ailments. The larger, village-wide *song krau* is held only once a year on the *wan sin yaay* corresponding with Songkran.

Annual *song krau* ceremonies are popular among the Tai of northern Thailand and the Shan States of Burma (Telford, 1937; Durrenberger, 1980; Davis, 1984). While I have not heard of such a ceremony being held in Central Thai villages, Scanlon (1985) mentions an exorcism of evil spirits performed in lowlands as part of Songkran;

Under a tent, a monk sits cross-legged on a special platform and chants religious verses while chewing a betel nut. As he works himself into a frenzy, devotees file by and pour glasses of water with flowers over his lower body. At the same time they hang money offerings on a clothesline next to the monk. After about thirty minutes of chanting, the monk suddenly goes into convulsions, kicking his legs, rolling his head, and swinging his arms as his jerking body is held firmly by devotees. The evil spirits are believed to leave his body at this instant (Scanlon, 1985).
This description is the only one of its kind I have encountered taking place at Songkran in Central Thailand.

In 2003, the song krau ritual at Pang Daeng Nai took place on April 16th, on the wan sin day corresponding with the Songkran festival. In keeping with the theme of purification, houses are cleaned thoroughly the morning of the ceremony. In Pang Daeng Nai, the ceremony is always conducted by a Buddhist monk and the ajaan (the Palaung lay Buddhist specialist) at the ho teur (central village post). The fact that a monk conducts the entire ceremony in Pang Daeng Nai differentiates the rite from other, similar recorded song krau found in the literature. The song krau ceremony described by Davis (1984) for the Northern Thai does not involve Buddhist monks; the chanting of the scriptures by the lay Buddhist ritual specialist is enough to produce the desired result. For the Shan of Kengtun, Telford (1937) describes a division of the ceremony into two parts: the exorcism being performed by a medium on the first day and a monk gives the blessing (complete with white threads) on the second day. While it is difficult to say why this difference occurs, its existence points to a relative interchangeability of Buddhist and “non-Buddhist” symbols of power.

Preparations for the song krau begin early in the morning, as the headman calls the villagers to come prepare the ho teur site and ready it for the ceremony. While the men prepare the site, cleaning away debris and building a bamboo fence around the ho teur; children are sent to the nearby stream to catch fish, crabs, and shellfish. These creatures are placed in a bucket next to the chanting monk during the ceremony. It is said that the animals absorb the krau, and releasing them in the river following the ceremony is another means of carrying the misfortune away. Bundles of bamboo are brought to the ho teur; each containing several long bamboo poles, paper fish flags, and banners with the animals of the Thai zodiac stamped on to them. These bundles are laid tee-pee style over the central post, and are later taken to the forest and laid against large trees as a means of sharing merit with the spirits (karnam) of the trees.

Also constructed in the morning are four large bamboo and wood platforms, known as peun song. Each platform is about two meters squared and is covered with banana leaves. Cords are attached to the corners of these platforms so that they may be lifted by means of a bamboo pole strung across the shoulders of two men and carried out of the village at the culmination of the ritual. As the morning progresses, the villagers bring various items to place on the platforms, such as candles, puffed pork skin, incense, tomatoes, bananas, khaaw nom (a sweet dessert made of sticky rice), flowers, pickled tea with tobacco wrapped in banana leaves, puffed rice, and plain rice. A paper cut out of each of the twelve animals of the Northern Thai (Lanna) zodiac (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, naga, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, elephant) are placed on each of the platforms.

In addition to the zodiac animals, the villagers also place a bit of hair on each platform. Like the zodiac animals, hair also has astrological connections linked with misfortune. Milne writes that a babies “hair should not be shaved or cut on the day of the week on which the

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13In Central Thailand, it is common for people to purchase birds and fish for release, but the practice is associated more with making merit than carrying away misfortune.

14In Central Thailand, a pig takes the place of the elephant.
A child was born” (Milne, 1924). Similar prohibitions are presented by Davis (1976) for cutting the hair of Northern Thai adults. Palaung also believe that hair is intimately tied to a person’s health. Hair can be used as a charm against a person and if stepped upon, can cause a person to become ill (Milne, 1924). The sending out a bit of one’s hair from the village may be related to the practice of offering substitute sacrifices of the personal clay and rice effigies noted by Rajadhon (1958) and Kauffmann (1977) for the Lawa and Thai. Milne (1924) reports similar offerings of rice and bamboo effigies to the temple when children are often ill.

During the *song krau* ceremony, the monk\(^1\) sits atop a wooden platform constructed over the *ho teur*. In the past, a wooden frame supported the platform, but in the year 2000, the frame was replaced with a cement tower, covered by a metal roof. Women are not allowed on the top of the platform, as it would place their genitalia above the central post, disrupting or destroying its protective power. In fact, women are not supposed to step foot inside the cement barrier surrounding the post. The anti-power of female genitalia is a common belief throughout lowland Southeast Asia (see Davis, 1984 for Northern Thai; Terweil, 1994 for Central Thai; Tannebaum, 1995 for Shan). Men rarely go up into the tower either, except to prepare for the *song krau* ceremony.

Before the monk takes his seat at the top of the tower, all ritual paraphernalia are put in place. A raised seat is placed in the tower, along with a glass of water for the monk. The bucket of water containing fish, crabs, and shellfish is brought up and placed close to the seat. Another bucket full of *somphoy* water is brought up, along with a bundle of tied plants for stirring and distributing the water. The monk stirs the water while chanting in order to charge it with protective power. It is then sprayed over the crowd at the end of the ceremony. Some of this water is poured out during the ceremony to share merit with other local spirits. One of the Buddha images is transferred from the temple yard to a raised table in the tower. Lastly, copies of scriptures written in Northern Thai are taken to the platform on a tray and placed next to the Buddha image.

In order to transfer the merit produced during the ceremony to the households, a white thread is run from the tower to a post of each house.\(^2\) These threads crisscross the entire village like a net and are connected together and held by the monk while he chants. These strings are known as *sai sin*, “sai” meaning “string” and “sin” meaning “precept”. Rajadhon (1961) likens the thread to “an electric wire” which charges up objects it touches. While

\(^1\)In 2003, a Northern Thai monk conducted the *song krau* ceremony. Now that Pang Daeng Nai has a resident Palaung monk, he will likely perform the ceremony in the future.

\(^2\)Telford provides one of the few descriptions of these threads for a Shan ceremony in Mung Yang, Kengtung State, Burma:

In the intervening space between the priests [Buddhist monks] and the tree [central post] were seated the representative heads of households and each sat under his own little tabernacle which consisted of a tripod of bamboo poles, in the top joints of which was a little rice, covered over and secured with paper or cloth. Around the trunk of the sacred tree were placed white cotton strings which extended towards and connected with each and every tripod and the ends of those unbroken cords, which seemed to bind all participants in a pond of unity and good fellowship, were deposited before the seated priests who recited prayers asking that blessing might come to the whole town which the assembled company represented (Telford 1937).
some writers are ambivalent about the meaning attached to these strings, the villagers understand the beneficial power to be merit (*bun*). During the ceremony, threads dangling down from this net are held by villagers or tied around their heads, or wrapped around bottles of *somphoy* water, which are later used to sprinkle over their houses as a further means of dispelling misfortune and blessing the home. Several of the younger villagers also take it upon themselves to connect a string to their motorcycle hoping to charge the vehicles with protective power.17

As mentioned above, bundles of bamboo poles and flags are placed beneath the platform covering the central post. Several other items are attached to the corners, such as a bamboo rake used to scare away Mara, the Buddhist personification of evil.18 Throughout the morning, families place bottles of *somphoy* water and bags full of shirts and pants on the floor beneath the platform. These clothes become charged with protective power. The four guns which are used to scare away the spirits at the close of the ceremony are also placed inside the *ho teur* so they can become charged as well.

In preparation for the ceremony, the *da bu muang* (spirit specialist) surrounds the *ho teur* with two ropes which prevent spirits from entering the area. The two ropes used here are *ratcha maat*, a rope made of two parallel strips (approximately 5 cm apart) of grass, with two more strips plaited around these two to form a diamond-shape pattern; and the *khaa kheo*, a rope made by twisting two large pieces of grass together. Once the ropes are in place, the *da bu muang* places a *taa leo*19 on each of the four posts. These prevent spirits from seeing inside the *ho teur* and are brought at the close of the ceremony, along with the *peun song*, to the four corners of the village to prevent the spirits from returning. As the ceremony is considered a Buddhist one, the placing of these protective emblems is the only contributions the *da bu muang* makes.

The preparation for the ceremony is primarily conducted by the *ajaan*. Besides preparing the area for the ceremony itself, the *ajaan* is responsible for dedicating an altar in...
front of the ho teur to a host of celestial beings. The altar is covered with seven banana leaves, puffed rice, and seven packets of flowers rolled in banana leaves, white paper fish-shaped flags on sticks, and three sticks of incense. In front of the altar, another three incense sticks and a yellow candle are burned. The ajaan then says a prayer in Pale, presenting the offerings to the deities of the six levels of heaven and Nang Thorani. All heavenly spirits are thus propitiated.

Just after noon, the monk takes his place in the tower and begins the ceremony by chanting Pali texts. The ceremony I observed lasted for two hours. Following the Pali texts, the monk asks the krau to leave the village. This part of the ceremony involves a lengthy chanting of scripture written in the Northern Thai language. After the scripture is finished, the monk recites a khaathaav21 to drive the bad spirits away. The word khaathaav is generally translated as a “magic spell.” Terweil (1994) uses the term in reference to the words spoken to activate the power of amulets and tattoos. In this case, it is a spell spoken to drive spirits out of the village. The khaathaav is shorter than the scripture, and is spoken in Pali interspersed with Northern Thai.22

During the recitation, the monk makes such pronouncements as, “Let all bad things leave the village. May you not be bitten by snakes, dogs, or other biting animals. May bad spirits stay out of your home.” It should be noted that the Palaung do not see this as a blessing, so much as a spell driving away the causes of this misfortune. While reciting the khaathaav, the monk stirs the water with the bundle of plants, and blows on the water. After he finishes, the water is poured off the platform by the ajaan to share merit with the local spirits who will not be driven out. The headman says another khaathaav ordering the krau of each of day of the week to leave the village.23 He then asks the men to take the four peun song out of the village. The guns and the four taa leo are removed from the ho teur and two men hoist each peun song onto their shoulders carry them to the edge of the village. This is not the same

20In the ceremony described by Davis (1984) for the Northern Thai, the entire ceremony focuses on this altar. He makes no mention of the central post. The Northern Thai altar described by Davis is similar in cosmic symbolism to that given here for the Palaung. A central post with a tray on top is dedicated to Inda, Lord of the thewada. From this central alter extends four bamboo arms representing the Four Lords of the cardinal directions. On the ground is a tray to Nang Thorani, the Mother Earth. Inda resides in the second level of heaven, while the Lords of the four cardinal directions and Nang Thorani reside in the first level (Davis, 1984).

21The word khatta comes from the Pali or Sanskrit word gatha (Terweil, 1994).

22While some would place the khaathaav in the realm of “not-Buddhist,” there is justification for such practices in the Pali Canon. This is particularly true of the parrita. According to Spiro, parrita are “spells consisting of chapters or sections of chapters taken from various books of the canon, mostly from the sutta, which are chanted for protection against danger” (Spiro, 1970). There are a number of famous parrita popular in Burma, one of which (the Khanda parrita) is said to have been composed by the Buddha himself (see Sao Htun, 1991).

23This corresponds somewhat with Davis’ (1984) “Nine Destroyers” who are said to be sent away on the raft at the end of the Northern Thai ceremony. Davis remarks that, for the Northern Thai, the ceremony is intimately tied with “the 27 rksa marking the days in the moon’s passage around Mount Sineru, and, more particularly, the navagraha or nine celestial deities. These deities are the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu, and Ketu” (Davis, 1984).
as the four cardinal directions; rather they are carried to the four corners of the village. The platform is placed on the ground, and the men spit on it. One of the men fires a gun over the platform to drive away the krau that are carried out with the food. A taa leo is then erected in front of the platform, so that the spirits will not come back. The peun song are left outside the village, and the men return to the ho teur site.

As the men are chasing the krau away, the monk explains the effects of this act on the village. “Let all you have good health, let all your crops grow, may you have much to eat.” The monk gives the villagers the five precepts and a blessing (bang baun) to the crowd, wishing the people money, strength, good things, and health. The blessing ends with the couplet; “May you have long life and live long.” After the blessing, another short khaathaa is recited, and water is poured off from the ho teur platform. The water poured out is not the same that the monk sprinkles on the crowd; rather, it is contained in separate bottles that are charged with merit during the chanting. Several other men in the village pour water from bottles at the same time to share the merit with the spirits of the village, forest, and the deceased who may not have been reborn.

After the monk finishes, the headman offers money to the monk on a tray, and announces that the ceremony is over. Children rush to grab the white thread, tearing down the overhanging web. Everyone gathers up bits of the string and ties it around their wrists for protection. The headman then takes the bucket of water and the bundle of plants and sprinkles water onto the crowd and ho teur. This water is thought to have protective powers and villagers crowd forward to receive a sprinkling.

As the villagers return home, the aquatic creatures are taken down to the river and released to carry away the krau. The villagers collect their clothing and somphoy water from around ho teur and return home to sprinkle their houses with the consecrated water. The bundles of bamboo sticks which had been laying all the while beneath the tower are taken out to the forest and laid against large trees in order to share merit with the spirits (karnam) who dwell inside. Some people deposit their bundles on top of the sira saay. Others place them against larger trees in the forest. Most of these sticks (duken), however, end up being laid against a large tree (heh reu ruken) which serves as a depository place for broken images of the Buddha, kings (past and present), or other powerful gods and goddesses. This imitates a similar act of placing a long stick with a forked top against this tree when a villager suspects ill fortune might strike in the near future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cultures are never static. Throughout this paper, I have noted similarities and differences between the Palaung and Tai Songkran, a festival which has been adopted by the Palaung from their lowland Tai neighbors. While I have concentrated on the specific aspects of the festival in Pang Daeng Nai, I wish to make two more generalizing concluding remarks.

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24This practice differs from both the Shan and the Northern Thai, as reported by Durrenberger (1980) and Davis (1984). In both cases only one tray is used. Durrenberger (1980) notes that the tray is carried south, while Davis (1984) notes that the tray is carried west.
The first is that rituals and beliefs change in the process of transmission to respond to local beliefs and practices that are already in place. Much of Palaung religious culture attests to this point, and the specifics of Songkran described herein provide some data on this process. This particular observation regarding cultural transmission has been stated by several scholars before (Marriott, 1955; Dumont and Pocock, 1959; Obeyesekere, 1963), but is worth repeating given the scarcity of studies examining how lowland traditions are transformed in highland communities throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

The second point I would like to make is that the transmission of religious beliefs carries with it a host of other cultural symbols and institutions, both religious and secular in character. Correspondingly, the adoption of secular institutions may carry a host of religious symbolism as it is transmitted from culture to culture. As noted above, the names of local spirits, such as the *tsao muang*, and spirit specialists, such as the *da bu muang*, both come from the Tai, while other spirit categories remain distinctively Palaung. As the Palaung adopt the Theravada Buddhism of the Tai, they simultaneously absorb spirit categories, specialist positions, ritual material culture, and cosmology which are distinctively Tai. In the case of the Palaung, who have adopted Buddhism, the explanations for ritual actions (such as merit) associated with festivals such as Songkran are readily accepted. I suspect that in other non-Buddhist highland cultures, the adoption of semi-secular festivals, such as Songkran, introduces cosmological justifications for actions that may, over time, become absorbed into the mesh of other highlander cosmological belief systems (Walker, 1981, 1986).

Just as the Palaung have absorbed the rites and beliefs of Shan and Burmese peoples in Burma in the past, they will be influenced by the practices of the Northern Thai of Thailand. Already the patronage of a Northern Thai temple, Wat Den, and its charismatic abbot, Khuu Baa Jaw Teung, has had an impact on the religious life of the Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai. Likewise, the modern Northern Thai traditions associated with Songkran, such as *muay thai* boxing and outdoor concerts in the rural areas, have an impact on what Songkran means to young Palaung men and women living in Chiang Mai province today. As the younger generation revels in the drinking, dancing, and water throwing that characterizes the modern Songkran festival, hopefully space will remain for the Palaung Songkran traditions of yesteryear.

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