

THE SHAN ROCKET FESTIVAL : BUDDHIST AND NON-BUDDHIST ASPECTS OF SHAN RELIGION

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Anthropologists have repeatedly commented on the apparent contradictions between Buddhist and non-Buddhist aspects of lowland southeast Asian religions (e.g. Spiro, 1967, 1970; Condominas, 1975; Tambiah, 1968, 1970; Brohm, 1952; Piker, 1968; Nash, 1965). They differ in their interpretations. Some argue there are two religions which fulfill different functions (e.g. Spiro, 1967) while others argue there is only one religion which encompasses both aspects (e.g. Tambiah, 1970). I shall address this larger question with reference to a particular Shan festival.

Along the sides of the rivers of Thailand's northwestern province of Maehong-sorn, Shan or Tai Long peasants have leveled and terraced areas of irrigated rice fields. Some villagers own insufficient land to meet their needs or own no irrigated land; they cultivate swiddens on the nearby hillsides. The villages are spaced along valleys where there is sufficient irrigable land and range in size from twenty-five to well over a hundred households. The Thai administrative level above the village is called a *tamboon*. The *tamboon* center of the area I studied was the village of Huai Pha. Nearby villages were Thongmakhsan, where I lived, Mawk Som Pae, Bang Mu, Napachat, Nam Kat, and Mae Sunya. Huai Pha, Napachat, Nam Kat, and Mae Sunya are in *tamboon* Huai Pha, but all of the villages invited villagers from the others to their festivals *poi*.

One of these is the festival some know as *poi nu phai* (*nu*=rat, mouse; *phai*=fire; *nu phai*=rocket (Cushing : 369)), the rocket festival. Others know it as *poi sa ti* (*sa ti*=pagoda, cedi) or the sand pagoda festival. It occurs sometime near the first half of May, at the end of the dry season, just before the rains begin. In 1976 the villages of Napachat and Bang Mu sponsored such festivals and invited villagers from Thongmakhsan to attend. I went to each with a party from Thongmakhsan.

Before we arrived, the people of the host village had prepared a sand pagoda in the temple (*kyong*) compound and put offerings of small packets of food, small paper umbrellas, and paper flags on it. They had put similar offerings on the offering places for the spirits inside the temple compound.

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In Napachat, the festival was on the seventeenth of May, on a *wan hsin*, holy day. The sand pagoda had been constructed in the southeast corner of the temple compound, though informants said it could be located anywhere. The pagoda consisted of nine square terraces, each supported by a plank on each side. Each terrace was smaller than the one below. The whole was surrounded by a loosely woven bamboo fence with a space between the base of the pagoda and the fence. There was a gap at the northwest corner for an entrance. At each corner of the fence, the center of each side of the fence, and the center of the pagoda were tall shafts capped with woven cylinders of bamboo and a paper umbrella. A string from which short paper streamers hung connected the corner posts on the perimeter of the pagoda above the fence on all but the western side. The pagoda was festooned with paper flags and umbrellas. People had also placed small banana leaf boxes filled with rice and other food offerings on the pagoda.

Just to the north of the northeast corner of the sand pagoda was an offering place for the spirits who guard the temple, the village, the houses. It was a stake driven into the ground with a square shelf on top. About a foot below the top shelf were two crossed members, each with a small shelf at its end. People had placed banana leaf packets of food offerings and joss sticks on the shelves of this structure.

A similar offering place surrounded by a fence was located at the northeast corner of the temple compound. On this people had placed similar offerings for the guardian of the temple. People place food offerings on the spirit offering places on other occasions, not only for the sand pagoda/rocket festival.

In Napachat, when I inquired about the meaning of the rocket festival, I heard various responses. One was that this was not actually a rocket festival, but a sand pagoda festival.

In the Buddha's time a poor man wanted to sponsor a festival like the rich people in town but had no money. But he wanted to offer. Crossing a river, he saw sand on the river bank and built a sand pagoda. When he finished he used the rice and curry from his lunch to offer. He offered one part for the Buddha and one part for the spirits, to dance and be happy. He had pure generosity (*tseitana*), the *tseitana* of festivals. After he died, he got to nirvana. So people now offer packets of rice when people make the sand pagoda festival, they like to be happy. In the old times, people did this and now we do it to be happy.

At an offering festival in the village of Huai Pha, which included the construction of a sand pagoda, a monk from Maehongsorn Town (the provincial capital) delivered the teaching (*tara*). Part of the teaching included the following story :

In past times, in the country of Pa Ran Na Hsi, there was a poor man. He saw a rich man sponsor a festival. "Oh, this is a very good festival in Pa Ran Na Hsi," he said. He thought: "Oh, I will go to the rich man's house and eat something there." After he went to the festival, the other people said: "Help carry water, help carry firewood, help wash the dishes." He did everything the others told him to do. After he finished the work, he came to eat. After he ate, people gave him sweets. After he was full and happy he thought: "The festival of the rich man is very good. It is good that he is a rich man. Whatever they want, they can do. But I did not make merit (*kuhso*) in the past. This is the merit of the past. The rich man has merit from the past so he receives all good things, all cool things, all happiness. One thing is making good works (offerings) in the past; second is making not good things in the past, demerit (*akuhso*).

It is because I did not make merit in the past that I am like this now. I am poor; it is an ugly life. Poverty of money, poverty of relatives, poverty of money, very poor." He thought: "Oh, I have no merit from the past, so my life now is very bad. I want to sponsor a festival like the rich man (Here the audience laughed); like the people of Huai Pha make the festival now."

He went home and all the way home he thought about this. He remembered that the Buddha taught, the Buddha himself taught: if we have things to offer, we have one power (*tan kho*). If we have offered the light, it gives *akyo* (merit, advantage) of bright knowledge. If we have offered food, flowers, and the four kinds of things for monks to use, it gives the advantage (*akyo*) of belongings and money, precious stones, so much that we cannot use it all. He remembered this teaching of the Buddha and he felt sorry for himself, was regretful. "Why have I become very poor like this?" he said. He thought and considered the whole way home. When he reached his palm leaf hut, he went to bed. After he got up, he took his knife and his back basket and his hat and went to the forest to cut firewood. He cut firewood and went to town and sold it for three pence.

One day when he went to cut firewood in the forest there was heavy rain and the wind was very strong and he could not do anything. He thought: "I can do nothing, it is very difficult. I cannot eat because I cannot sell this firewood in town." He said: "I will take flowers and leaves to sell in town instead of firewood. He peddled them in the town of Pa Ran Na Hsi.

He could not sell them anywhere he went. Whatever house he went to, the people said: "Tomorrow is not *wan hsin* so we do not need to buy flowers and leaves. We cannot keep them. Sell them somewhere else." "Older brother does not need them; uncle does not need them. Grandmother

brings flowers from the garden." He could do nothing. He continued on his way trying to sell them. He arrived at one rich man's house. He said to the rich man: "I can do nothing, I have no rice to eat today, I have no firewood to sell. I have only these leaves and flowers. Kindly, please buy them. Give me whatever you like." The rich man said: "Your leaves and flowers are very scarce, so I will give you a measure of rice."

The poor man was very happy and went back home. When he reached home he thought: "If I cook this rice for supper, I will have nothing to eat tomorrow morning. It is not enough for two meals. If I cut firewood, I will not be able to work well. If I eat no rice in the morning, I cannot carry the firewood. It does not matter. I will not eat tonight. It is better to go to bed. So he put the rice in the corner of the house and went to bed.

When the sun came up early in the morning he got up and cooked his rice. He thought: "If I eat this morning, I will have no rice to eat in the afternoon. What can I do in the afternoon? It does not matter. I will not eat now. When I go into the forest and cut firewood and have finished all my work, I will eat the rice." He thought this: "If I have no rice to eat in the afternoon, I will not have strength enough to carry the firewood home."

He put the rice in his basket and went into the forest with his hat and knife and bag. That day, because of his previous intentions to sponsor a festival even though he had no money, his *akyo* was very great. Because of his intentions (*tseitana*) a *khun phi* (superior spirit) made everything around him white sand. He thought: "I come this way every day, but I have never seen this white sand. Perhaps there was a flood last night and today the sand is spread about." He had good intentions (*tseitana*) and gathered the white sand and piled it up to make a sand pagoda (*sa ti*). He had no time to cut his firewood. He made the sand pagoda. After he finished making the sand pagoda, he brought flowers to put on it. And he remembered: I went to the rich man's house and heard the teaching (*tara*): "If we offer a pagoda to the Buddha, the power (*tan kho*) is very great." He was a man of great power and knowledge and he remembered that if one offers a sand pagoda one gets much power and wisdom. He thought: "It does not matter for my present life." He divided the rice from the house into three parts. One part to offer to the Buddha; one part to offer to the teaching (*tara*) of the Buddha: one part to offer to the monks of the Buddha. Then he presented it to the sand pagoda and offered it.

He prayed like this: "This is for the Buddha," and he put it on the sand pagoda. One part of the rice he offered for the teaching at the base of the sand pagoda. He thought: "I need some monks; there are no monks

to whom to offer the third part. Where can I offer it? There are no monks in this forest." He looked for a tree to use as a monk. He used that tree for a monk. On the tree were two crows who said: "Argh, argh." The man said, "Very good, these crows will be my monks," and he presented the offering and offered it as to a monk. He prayed.

After that he went on to look for his firewood. Then he went home. When he arrived home, he went around Pa Ran Na Hsi to sell firewood. He asked not more than two or three houses and the people bought his firewood immediately. He thought: "Today my merit is very great. I did not have to ask at many houses. I got *kuhso* immediately. It was not like this two or three days ago." He sold the wood immediately and got three pence. He said: "Last night I had no food and did not eat. This morning and this afternoon I had no food. So I will buy noodles with this three pence." He bought noodles with all three pence and took it home and ate too much. Because he was very hungry and had not eaten in a long time, he ate it all. When he finished, his stomach was full and he could not get up. He slept in the same place. At midnight he felt a stomach ache. There was no medicine for this, he said, and it got worse and worse.

So, if we have the three kinds of *tseitana* whatever we do becomes excellent. We can succeed in whatever we attempt. Then there is no misery. So we offer things depending on our *tseitana*. *Tseitana* is very great.

Then the poor man changed his life (died). His *kuhso*, his *tseitana* was very great, so his spirit went to a royal palace and he was born the child of a king's wife. He was born as a prince, son of a king.

The story goes on to describe the life of the man as a prince and then as a king. The story illustrates the immediate and long range benefits of making sand pagodas and in general of making offerings to acquire merit.

A lay reader in Huai Pha said that people make sand pagoda festivals at the end of the new year festival. The body is composed of the elements: fire, earth, air, water. The sand pagoda represents the earth element, and is to respect the Buddha and request the Buddha to let the rain fall and let the land be green so all people can plant crops. "This is the Buddha's teaching."

People can make sand pagodas at other times during the year if they are not well and want to "support" the element earth. Informants said the sand pagoda for the festival could be located anywhere, the location is not significant.

When groups of guests arrived at Napachat, the hosts gave them banana leaf bundles of rice and curry. The guests then dispersed to visit friends and relatives. At ten-thirty, the Napachat monk used the temple's battery operated loud speaker system

to call the villagers to come quickly to the temple. People served food to the monks. There were six monks at the temple. They had come from Huai pha, Mawak Sam Pae, and Maehongsoran Town. The temple gong was sounded.

A procession of Napachat villagers danced through the village and into the temple compound with four rockets and offering trees. A rocket is made of a bamboo tube filled with gunpowder. The tube is lashed onto a bamboo from fifteen to thirty feet long. People say the tapering bamboo looks like a rat's tail, hence the name for the rockets, *nu phai*. The powder packed bamboo cylinder is surrounded by smaller empty bamboo lengths which whistle as the rocket descends. The young men who carried the rockets held them over their shoulders with the powder cylinder cradled against the shoulder so the bamboo shaft would spring about in the air as they danced. The offering trees were bamboo splints inserted into banana tree segments, each with a piece of Thai currency wedged into a slot at the end. A band composed of a long drum, cymbals, and gongs, accompanied the dancing procession through the village and into the temple compound.

At eleven o'clock the monks had finished eating and the men served food to the visitors in the temple. A rocket was lashed to the rafters of the temple. This rocket was sponsored by the monks. A group of people or an individual may make a rocket, or a person or group may pay others to construct a rocket. The Napachat monks had paid for the materials in the rocket and others had built it.

In Napachat, when I inquired about the meaning of the rockets, one elder said the *tak ka tɔn* did it in the past. Cushing translates *tak ka tɔn* as "heretic" (262). It usually refers to those who, in the time of the Buddha knew of him and his teaching but did not follow Buddhism.

The lay reader from Huai Pha said the rocket festival, "is the wisdom (*pingnya*) of the *tak ka tɔn*."

In the time of the Buddha, they competed with his power. The Buddha had the power to fly in the sky so the *tak ka tɔn* made rockets with bamboo and gunpowder and shot them to the sky. They thought if the Buddha could fly to the sky, they could also, they could make rockets to fly to the sky.

I inquired what the meaning of rockets is now. He answered :

Rockets existed in the Buddha's time, now when people do it, it is to make them happy. If the rockets go high, people feel happy, that they have power and good *akpo* (merit) and people cheer and feel happy. It is following the old way since there were rockets in the Buddha's time. It is only for happiness. People do not get *kuhso* or *akyo* from shooting rockets. The *akyo* is as small as an ant's foot. It is only for amusement, even though

they cost about fifty baht (U.S. \$ 2.50) or more to make. There is no *akyo* in this. Only the offerings have *akyo*; the rockets have no *akyo* at all. In the past this was in competition with Buddhism for power: the unbelievers competed with the Buddha, so the rockets have no *kuhso*. If a rocket explodes and falls, the Buddha wins; but if the rocket goes up, it means the people win over the Buddha, so the thing is reversed. When people win over the Buddha, they are happy and should not be. When the Buddha wins, people are unhappy.

While others ate in the temple, the young men of Thongmakhsan ate and drank in a house nearby. At twelve-thirty more people entered the temple with offerings, flowers, and offering trees, which they put on a table in front of the Buddha image. At one-thirty a troupe of eleven dancing girls began dancing Thai dances to the accompaniment of recorded music from the loud speaker system. A Thai teacher in the village had organized the troupe and taught them Thai style dances. At two o'clock the lay reader from Huai Pha announced over the speakers: "Time is not waiting for us, please come immediately and make offerings; bring your offering trees; and then we will fire the rockets." The temple gong was sounded. In all there were about two-hundred offering trees, each with about fifty baht.

One of the guests in the temple was a Kayah "tribesman" from a nearby village. The headman of Napachat instructed him how to present offerings, and he offered flowers.

At half past two another procession with ten rockets wound its way through the village and into the temple compound. The rockets were also from Napachat. The people circumambulated the temple twice shouting, dancing, and playing the drums, gongs, and cymbals.

At the request of the lay reader from Huai Pha, the monk from Napachat recited the Buddhist duties and the headman of Napachat asked for him to teach, asked for a *tara*. The monk said the headman and villagers had prepared the *ppi sa ti*, that there was much *akyo*. He said that *sa ti* is the same in Thai, Pali, and Burmese, that it has much *akyo*. He taught of the virtues of cooperation and working together, that to build a temple and other big work, sponsoring a festival, requires cooperation. If the headman must be coercive and fine people who do not cooperate, it is not good; all people should cooperate. The Buddha taught people should cooperate. He ended with a blessing that all the people have good appetites, enjoy good health, and good fortune.

The elders then presented the offerings to the monks and the monks chanted. They chanted a second time and people poured water through the floorboards of the temple. The chanting finished at half past three. During the teaching people had begun to fire rockets.

People fired the rockets from trees behind the temple. They positioned each rocket with the powder cylinder uppermost, the narrow end of the bamboo tail toward the ground, and climbed in the tree to ignite the fuse. The bands kept playing the drums, gongs, and cymbals. Some people were very drunk. At half past four guests began to depart for their villages.

The teaching, the chanting, and pouring water to share the merit acquired from the offerings with others is common to all offerings, not unique to this festival.

The festival in Pang Mu was similar but there were more rockets. The rockets were launched in rice fields near the village rather than from the temple. A group of monks went to watch the rockets being fired.

On neither occasion were the rockets presented to the guardian spirits, *tsau mōng* of the village, or the spirit offering places inside the temple compounds. Nor was there any mud throwing when rockets were unsuccessful as Tambiah (1970) reports. Many other aspects of the Shan rocket festival are different from Tambiah's (1970) description for Northeast Thailand and Condominas' for Laos (1975). Not only does it not entail the guardian spirits or involve ritual license, it is not associated with ordination, but with the offering of sand pagodas and it is the sand pagodas that are instrumental in bringing rain, a Buddhist, not a spirit oriented ritual.

Tambiah's analysis of the rocket festival draws heavily on particular local associations and mythologies. Since his analysis is couched in such local terms, it provides no guide to rocket festivals in other areas, but only an account of the rocket festival in that place. To answer the general question Tambiah poses of the relation between Buddhist and spirit oriented activities and ideologies, one must attend to the general features of both and not make the analysis depend on particular local features of either as Tambiah does. Because of the differences between Shan and Northeastern Thai ethnography, Tambiah's analysis of the rocket festival sheds no light on the Shan situation. An adequate theory to account for the relations between spirit and Buddhist aspects of ideology and ritual should be capable of illuminating these relations wherever they occur. I do not reject Tambiah's analysis; it is simply irrelevant to the Shan case. I object to his approach because it causes his analysis to be irrelevant.

The uninhibited dancing procession accompanied by the band and drinking is not unique to the rocket festival. When villages hold offering festivals, individual households sponsor offering trees. Other households in the vicinity contribute to the offering tree. The young men carry the trees, mounted on palanquins, through the village with the accompanying band, singing and dancing. The young men tend to be riotous. At one such festival in Thongmakhsan, many of the young men and some of the older men were quite drunk. Groups of youths from Thongmakhsan and Huai Pha

confronted each other and there was a brief fight. The elders broke up the fight and advised people to return the offering trees to their houses. The next day, the processions went to the temple in a more orderly fashion, presented the offerings, and heard the teaching.

Preuss (1979) suggests such behavior is an expression of disorder within the greater order of Buddhist merit making at the beginning of the new year. The disorder within the context of the Buddhist order indicates that, "unpredictable forces and their effects may be neutralized through the ritual of Theravada Buddhist merit-making and its consequences" (271). If entry into a new period of time were a significant aspect of such events, they would occur only at the end of the old year and not be distributed into the new year. The pattern seems general whether it is associated with the rocket festival, presentation of offering trees, or support posts as Preuss describes.

What seems puzzling is the juxtaposition of the riotous behavior of the presentation of the offerings or rockets or posts to the village with the solemn taking of the five vows not to drink, take life, engage in illicit sexuality, lie, and steal only moments later. Villagers recognize the dangers of such riotous behavior from past experiences such as the disrupted festival in Thongmakhsan, and say that one of the functions of the village guardian spirit, *tsau mông*, is to prevent such outbreaks of violence.

Spiro (1967), in line with his "two religions" thesis, suggests that this pattern is the juxtaposition of a dionysian spirit component with an otherworldly Buddhist component, each meeting different psychological needs of the Burmese character. The dionysian component acts as an escape valve for the expression of impulses prohibited by the more austere Buddhism.

From the point of view of Shan villagers there are two separate spheres: a spirit component and a Buddhist one. The first provides ways to achieve particular concrete goals; the second, a means to increase one's individual innate power by incrementing his or her merit by making offerings. The source of innate power is merit from offerings. The application of the power is irrelevant to its source. To gain power, and the protection it insures, one makes merit; to achieve particular concrete goals, one propitiates spirits or exercises power. Hanks (1965: 89) suggests power is simply the lack of inhibitions on one's wishes or behavior. In this sense, the riotous presentation of rockets or offering trees or support posts is an expression of power, the lack of inhibitions, having fun, being happy, as villagers usually style such behavior. Power is power. The way it is used or expressed does not diminish it.

• For Shan, the rockets are not related to any spirit offerings, nor to any Buddhist merit making; they are clearly secular in any sense. They offer a way to express and test one's power; a secular field for the exercise of innate power.

In offering this interpretation I am following the native exegesis provided by the lay reader of Huai Pha, that the firing of rockets is a test of merit and a competition among the launchers, a test of their power against each other and in a more absolute sense, against the Buddha himself. This interpretation receives some confirmation from Keyes' account (1975) of the cremation of a senior monk. Keyes argues that the corpse of the monk was itself a powerful object and that offerings to it were productive of merit; it was a, "channel of merit" (47). After a tug of war for the corpse, which conferred merit to the participants, the corpse was taken to a funeral pyre which was ignited by an elaborate system of fireworks in which rockets were fired at the pyre. From the photographs of figures six and seven, the rockets appear similar to those used at the rocket/sand pagoda festival. My conjecture is that the rockets may be more than a convenient way to ignite a funeral pyre, not an especially effective one, but rather be indicative of power. The first rockets did not ignite the pyre. The rockets might be interpreted as competing with the power of the corpse, though Keyes does not develop such an interpretation.

The firing of rockets is an exercise of power derived from merit, a test of power, a special case, the more general form of which is the dancing and dionysian behavior of the processions which accompany several kinds of Buddhist events. Why, then, is it the young men as a category who participate in these displays, as Pruess asks? The ideology of merit and power assigns less power to women than men, so women would neither need to demonstrate nor test their power. Older men and household heads have already established their positions or are operating in more meaningful and less symbolic spheres of actual political, social, and economic relations. It is the young men who have not yet established bases from which to demonstrate their power or compete for power in these areas who have aspirations to power, but no field for its exercise. Hence, they form the only social category for whom it is meaningful to compete for or exhibit power in symbolic terms of processions and rockets.

Although dionysian processions and firing rockets may be non-Buddhist, even anti-Buddhist as many observers and participants have noted, these events are of a piece with the Buddhist merit making with which they are linked. They provide the arena for displays and tests of power, especially for a social category, young men, with no other arena for the exercise of their power, and are concatenated with events, merit making offerings, which confer power. The critical point is that the field of the exercise of power need have no relation with the origin of the power. Power acquired by virtuous acts may be used to unvirtuous ends.

In Northeastern Thailand and Laos, the cases Tambiah (1970) and Condominas (1975) describe, there is another element, a guardian spirit as an audience for supplication. In Northeast Thailand the rockets are offered to the spirit on behalf of the village

and supplications made on behalf of the whole village. The most powerful of the villagers, the elders, rather than the youth, present the rockets to the spirit with the aid of the mediums. Otherwise, the pattern is similar, especially with regard to what Tambiah calls ritual license. If rockets fail, people throw mud at their launchers, whether they be monks, elders, or others. This falls in line with the notion of power displays and power competition. The major difference is in the procession addressed to a guardian spirit. Introducing this spirit as an audience for offering provides a different context for the operation of the logic of power so that elders and mediums must present the offerings to the spirit.

The interpretation I offer here in terms of the logic of power has the advantage of integrating the separate interpretations of different events in different regions into a coherent pattern rather than relying on specifically local features or mythologies for the development of disparate ad hoc theories for each local event. It suggests how two apparently contradictory religious themes (Condominas, 1975 : 271) are complementary.

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