Approval

Name: Sean Ashley
Degree: Master of Arts
Title of Thesis: Exorcising with Buddha: Palaung Buddhism in Northern Thailand

Examinining Committee:
Chair: Dr. Barbara Mitchell

Dr. Michael Howard
Senior Supervisor
Professor of Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Michael Kenny
Member
Professor of Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Jan Walls
External Examiner
Professor of Humanities and Director, David Lam Centre
Simon Fraser University

Date Approved: 6 April 2004
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ABSTRACT

Theravada Buddhism is often characterized as a religion of individualistic ascetics. This belief has led many scholars to disregard Buddhist rituals and ceremonies that are oriented towards practical, this-worldly goals such as health, wealth, and happiness. I argue that Buddhist ceremonies are commonly oriented towards bringing about practical results in the present or near future. Furthermore, I argue that because of its ability to bring about practical results, Buddhist ceremonies can act to strengthen group identity, as individuals benefit from village wide ceremonies by virtue of being community members.

The focus of this thesis is the Songkran festival held in the Palaung village of Pang Daeng Nai, Chiang Mai province, Thailand. The Palaung are a Mon-Khmer speaking minority group who, unlike most other highland minorities inhabiting northern Thailand, are long time Theravada Buddhists. While there are several Buddhist rites which take place throughout the festival, this thesis focuses on the song krau ceremony - a village wide exorcism and blessing aimed at removing misfortune from the village and ensuring prosperity for the coming year. The ceremony illustrates the way Buddhism is used to bring about practical results, as well as constructing a sense of group identity within the village.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of A-Rot Jongtan, whose friendship and assistance made this work possible.
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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion of mainland Southeast Asia. In Thailand, it serves as the national religion and acts as an important symbol for Thai identity. While enjoying widespread popularity throughout the region, Theravada Buddhism does not exist in isolation. Religious ceremonies and rituals commonly blend Theravada Buddhism with beliefs and practices derived from Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs that predate these so-called world religions. This religious complexity has long fascinated anthropologists and has provided fodder for innumerable papers, monographs, and theses on the subject.

The mixing of these religious practices is often described in terms of a “great tradition” (Theravada Buddhism) interacting with a “little tradition” (peasant culture). This theoretical division is not rooted in the Southeast Asian material. It can be traced back at least as far as Robert Redfield (1956), who argued that peasant society is essentially a “half-society” that is “so incomplete a system” that it must be described in relation to a greater tradition (Redfield 1956: 37). In the case of religion and philosophy, the “great tradition” refers to the reflective philosophising of the educated elite, while the little tradition is comprised of the folk practices and local interpretations of the largely unreflective peasantry.

McKim Marriott further developed the concept of “greater” and “lesser” tradition in his studies of rural India. Marriott identifies the “great tradition” as “the literate
religious tradition, embodied in or derived from Sanskrit works which have a universal spread in all parts of India” (Marriott 1955: 191). As the great tradition becomes absorbed into the local culture, it becomes transformed by the local tradition (Marriott 1955: 199). This model presents the great versus little tradition in dialectical terms, reflecting the agency of the peasantry in constructing their own local traditions. Despite the usefulness of such models, there still exists the question of how the greater and lesser tradition manifests itself to the anthropologist in the field. In other words, can any current practices be pointed to as being clearly greater or lesser tradition?

For Marriott, the “little tradition” refers to those practices that do not have textual support or widespread correlates throughout India. He uses the term “residual categories” in reference to these practices. The problem with this view is that it falsely identifies the “great tradition” (Hinduism in his case) found in urban centres with institutions found at the local level. In the literature on Theravada Buddhism, this leads to stratigraphic models positing structural divisions of labour between supposed incommensurable traditions (Obeyesekere 1963: 140-141). In many cases, Buddhist institutions are said to deal with the issue of otherworldly salvation, while other practices (often labelled “animism”) deal with the more mundane issues of fertility, protection and health (Ames 1964; Kaufman 1960; Kirsh 1977).

This perspective misunderstands the dynamics of cultural construction within a village. Despite the fact villages cannot be considered isolated entities, “great” literate traditions which come from outside do not form separate layers of meaning but are transformed to reflect existing and new village beliefs and concerns (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 45). While recognising the openness of peasant societies in relation to “greater traditions,” external institutions are commonly transformed in the process of transmission
to the point where all aspects of a local religion should be considered part of its "little tradition" (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 44).

While treating all aspects of peasant cultures as autonomous "little traditions" provides a more holistic picture of local religious practice, we are nonetheless left asking what is the "great tradition?" Marriott clearly identifies the "great tradition" as "the literate religious tradition," specifically the tradition derived from Sanskrit texts (Marriott 1955: 191). Similarly, Obeyesekere identifies the "great tradition" of Theravada Buddhism as "the greater community of monks, intellectuals, and scholars" (Obeyesekere 1963: 142). In both cases, the defining feature of the "great tradition" is its textual referents, Sanskrit texts for Marriott (1955) and Pali texts for Obeyesekere (1963).

While it is true that a "greater tradition" commonly comes to influence a "lesser" or "local tradition," it is misleading to posit one "great tradition" of Theravada Buddhism interacting with disparate local traditions around Asia. The literate tradition of educated Pali scholars is itself a "little tradition," despite its high level of sophistication. There is no "great tradition" in the sense of a one true Buddhism, only "little traditions" taking different forms across classes, ethnic groups, and regions. These little traditions all have common links, and in the case of Theravada Buddhism, common texts and a claim to an unbroken line of ordination stretching back to Siddhata Gotama. But judging which of these interpretations represent the "correct" tradition is the job of theologians, not anthropologists. Furthermore, if the great tradition is simply the "reflective elite" of monks and educated populace, than we are left with the problem of deciding who is

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1 The canonical texts of Theravada Buddhism, known as the *Tipitaka* or "Three Baskets," are written in Pali, an Indic language closely related to Sanskrit. The "Three Baskets" include the *vinaya*, which sets out the rules of conduct for monks, the *sutta*, which contain the teachings of the Buddha, and the *abhidhamma*, which consists of latter commentaries on the *suttas*.
sophisticated enough in their thought to be considered part of this "educated elite," another value judgement which privileges one group's interpretation over another.

While there is no "great tradition," there are local "little" traditions interacting with "greater" traditions. The difference is that these "greater traditions" do not represent any "great tradition," but a situation where a particular tradition (such as Buddhism) effectively spreads to other cultural areas. I use the term "greater" here not to refer to a culture of seemingly greater sophistication, but as the traditions being adopted by the receiving culture. These greater religious traditions have already passed through other cultures, and their transmission commonly comes packaged in the "little traditions" of the contributing society.

In the case of the Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai, whom I worked among, the greater traditions are those of the Tai. In the past, these were the Tai speaking groups living primarily in Burma who are often referred to as the Shan, while today the Palaung are more influenced by the Northern Thai of Chiang Mai province, Thailand. The Palaung are anomalous among other highland minorities in that they are long time Theravada Buddhists. The Theravada Buddhist practices of the Palaung do not represent the outcome of a local tradition interacting with an abstract "great tradition" of Buddhism, but a local culture interacting with the "little tradition" of Theravada Buddhism as practised by another ethnic group. The result of this interaction is a local tradition of Palaung Theravada Buddhism, continually influenced by outside or "greater" forms of Buddhism, but nonetheless local in character.

2 I use the term Tai here to denote a 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.
This thesis focuses on the Buddhist customs and ceremonies that take place during Songkran, the traditional new year's festival observed by many different ethnic groups across Southeast Asia. Several different rites take place during the three-day festival, some of which are more Buddhist than others. My own work focuses on the song krau ritual - a village wide exorcism and blessing aimed at removing misfortune from the village and ensuring prosperity for the coming year. I argue that in spite of its practical, this-worldly focus, the song krau is nonetheless a Buddhist ceremony. Furthermore, I argue that because of this ability to bring about practical, this-worldly results, Buddhist ceremonies can act to strengthen group identity, as individuals from such ceremonies benefit by virtue of being community members.

Methodology

To study the Buddhism of the Palaung, I employed the favoured methodology of anthropologists - participant observation. While the term participant observation is widely used within anthropology, the term is difficult to define. Some writers have suggested all social research is a form of participant observation, as we can never completely separate ourselves from the social world we study, while others have argued that participant observation itself is not a methodology at all (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983).

Part of the confusion in defining participant observation lay in the multiple situations in which the methodology is now employed. As the approach has been adopted

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3 One fourfold typology breaks participant observation into four categories: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant (Gold 1958; Junker 1960). This typology rests on the degree of involvement, but as Schwandt (1994) has pointed out, it runs together other important dimensions, such as how informed those being observed are regarding the research, and what activities are participated in and which are not.
by various disciplines (psychology, sociology, criminology, and commerce, to name a few), participant observation has come to be defined more and more by its context. In traditional anthropology, it suggests complete immersion in the everyday life of the people whose culture is being studied. This is the sense in which I employ the term to describe my own research.

While working with the Palaung, I lived in the village of Pang Daeng Nai, Chiang Mai province, Thailand. I lived in Pang Daeng Nai from January to May of 2003, staying with the family of the village headman, Kham. Before this period, I was living in Bangkok and made several trips to the village between August 2002 and January 2003 to attend religious festivals and ceremonies. From May to August 2003 I lived in the nearby city of Chiang Mai and made weekly trips to the village, often staying two or three days, to attend festivals and ceremonies, conduct further interviews, check data, and visit friends.

Living with Kham and his family, I was present for all the village rituals, both calendrical and spontaneous, and most importantly cultivated valuable relationships with the villagers. I believe it is too often unacknowledged how valuable the friendships we make are to the ethnographies we produce. As Mills wrote of his experience working with the Naga,

In my view friendship, and by that I mean real friendship, is the master key to the amateur [anthropologist]'s work in the field. The hobby brings you friends, and without friends it cannot be properly pursued. Real mutual trust and confidence must be established, and if you show your interest in and appreciation of their institutions, your friends will in turn reveal to you
their pride in them and tell you things you might not otherwise learn (Mills [1953] quoted in Woodward 1996: 138).

A great deal of my data came from unstructured interviews with friends. Many of these interviews were conducted during events, such as sermons and festivals. Furthermore, while I never participated in any rituals as a significant actor, I was always present as a lay participator following rules of decorum.

In the course of my research I became a prolific note-taker and did not find that this impeded the flow of conversation. In fact, I found that taking notes in the presence of informants to be a useful way of expanding on particular points and verifying my understanding. I would commonly be asked to read back what I had written, at which points corrections could be made or points could be expanded on. In this way, people also became more aware of what I was interested in and were more trusting and able to help.

I also employed structured and semi-structured interviews to a lesser degree. Structured interviews were conducted in association with Danish consortium SLUSE (Sustainable Land Use and Natural Resource Management) during the first week of my fieldwork. This involved a house-to-house survey of household members, economic livelihood, and property holdings. Later semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted to elaborate on points of interest and to check data. These interviews were done sporadically and often with the help of an interpreter as they involved the interviewing of elderly members of the community. All interviews were taped, and

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4 A field-school conducted by Chiang Mai University and the University of Copenhagen. My first week in the village was shared with fifteen students from this program.
interviews conducted using interpreters early in the fieldwork period were revisited after I gained a higher level of competency in Thai to check for misunderstandings and errors.

I conducted my research primarily in the Central Thai language. I studied Thai in Vancouver for one semester (January to April 2002), then in Bangkok for four months (August to December 2002) before beginning my fieldwork in Pang Daeng Nai. The villagers speak Pale (Silver Palaung), a Mon-Khmer language. Most Palaung in Pang Daeng Nai under the age of 30 can speak Central Thai, having studied it for several years at the nearby local school. Most men and women over 30 years of age can speak a fair bit of Central Thai if they must, as it is the language heard on television and of many popular songs. The common language spoken in the region is the Northern Thai language (also known as “Muang” or “Lanna Thai”), which, although closely related to Central Thai, has many idiosyncrasies that sometimes renders the two mutually unintelligible. In addition to Pale, elderly people speak Northern Thai or Tai Yai (a Shan language). As a result of the widespread use of Northern Thai, I got used to speaking Thai interspersed with many Northern Thai words, tones, and accents, but I never became proficient enough to conduct interviews with Northern Thai speakers without an assistant. In the course of my research, younger Palaung villagers helped me conduct interviews with elderly men and women.5

In my opinion, the language issue represents the biggest methodological weakness in the study. While I am confident that through checking and rechecking data I have eliminated many errors arising from an incomplete knowledge of Thai, I feel that the study of religious practice requires an understanding of the local language. Problems arise

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5 These interviews were primarily conducted with the help of one man, A-Rot. At other times, I was assisted by other men and women, sometimes several at one time, depending on the circumstances.
as terms are translated from Pale to Thai.\(^6\) This was particularly a problem for interviews with non-Thai speaking Palaung elders. Unfortunately, practical restraints on the period of the research prevented the study of Pale. Nonetheless, I try to present the Palaung terms, particularly related to religious practice, wherever possible.

Photographs proved to be another valuable source of data. Once a festival or ceremony was finished, people invariably wanted to see the photographs. I often made copies of pictures, and at festivals became an unofficial photographer taking personal pictures for the villagers and documenting the event for both the village and myself. A great deal of data was unearthed as villagers explained the content of photographs to me. They also proved to be valuable descriptive and memory aids while writing more detailed descriptions of the events.

Finally, it should be noted that the qualitative data collected in the field and the nature of the questions explored do not lend themselves to systematic discovery procedure. The validity of the arguments presented here coincide with what Tannenbaum (1995: 18) calls their “goodness of fit” which comes from “the structure of the evidence and its ability to account for anomalies that others leave unexplained.” Unlike Tannebaum, I am not proposing an overarching explanatory model for a Palaung worldview. Nonetheless, the arguments presented here concerning the use of Buddhist symbols in Palaung rituals and their relation to the community shed light on some

\(^6\) An example of this was when to translate the term karnam, a Palaung term for any non-human spirit, as phi or theweda. Phi is the common word for spirit in Thai, though theweda, a Thai word borrowed from Pali, is also used. Within the village, theweda is commonly used in reference to guardian spirits. Depending on who you speak with, it may also be used to refer to the spirits of large trees. The two terms are consequently ambiguous in the Thai context, so whenever possible, I employed the Palaung term during interviews (see van Esterik 1982).
anomalies found within other literature, such as the practical application of merit and the social nature of Buddhist rituals.

Transliteration
A number of terms from different languages are used throughout this thesis, none of which have any standard way of transcribing the terms into Roman characters. In the case of Thai, I have followed the system used by Skinner and Kirsch (1975). In no cases have I attempted to indicate the tone of a word. In the case of Northern Thai and Shan terms, I have used the spelling provided by the authors themselves. Pali terms are more standardised than the Tai words, and are given here in their popular spelling, minus the diacritical marks.

The Pale terms are more difficult, given the general lack of material and my own relative unfamiliarity with the language. I have tried to render the terms as faithfully as possible, often getting them written out in Thai characters by one of the villagers before transliterating it into Roman characters. The Pale language has many borrowed terms, especially in the case of their religious lexicon. Whenever possible I note the origin of such terms, but do not distinguish them as being “Thai” or “Shan” if they have been incorporated into the Pale language.
CHAPTER TWO:
SETTING AND BACKGROUND

“True ‘Hill People’ are never Buddhists” (Leach 1960: 52). So wrote Edmund Leach in a paper describing the difference between highland minority groups in Burma and their lowland Tai and Burmese neighbours. This understanding of highland religion is widely held, and most studies of the religious practices of “hill peoples” either use it as grounds for comparison or ignore Buddhism altogether. In spite of his generalising statement, Leach nonetheless mentions in Political Systems of Highland Burma the Buddhist “hill-dwelling” Palaung peoples occupying parts of the Shan States of Burma (Leach 1954: 30, 57).

In fairness to Leach and others, while the lowland Tai and Burmese are predominately Buddhists, most highland ethnic minority groups (commonly known as “hill tribes”) are not. The term “hill tribe” includes a variety of ethnolinguistic groups, including the Akha, Lisu, Wa, and Karen. Besides holding different religious beliefs, highlanders commonly live at higher elevations and practice swidden agriculture (Kunstadter 1983: 15). Their religious traditions are commonly referred to as “animistic,” though several groups, such as the Lisu and Karen, have been receptive to Christian conversion.

It was the anomalous presence of Theravada Buddhism among the highland Palaung that I initially found so interesting. The Palaung embody both highland characteristics (swidden agriculturists, highland dwellers, and a distinct Mon-Khmer
language), but have long been practising Theravada Buddhists. While some scholars place the term “Buddhist” in quotation marks when speaking about Buddhism in the highlands, no qualification is required when talking about the religious practice of the Palaung. Buddhism for the Palaung serves both as a belief system and a source of identity. Palaung men and women do not become Buddhist; they are born Buddhists.

The term “Palaung” is of Burmese origin and refers to a group of Mon-Khmer speaking peoples 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: 721). 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. Only the Pale are found in northern Thailand, where they number between 2,000 and 3,000. There are approximately 600,000 Palaung living in Burma and 12,000 living in China. Of these, approximately 200,000 to 300,000 are Pale speakers (Grimes 1996: 721).

There is relatively little written about Palaung culture in general. Anthropological research on ethnic minorities in Burma effectively came to a halt in 1962 following General Ne Win’s coup. The relative isolation of the Palaung, coupled with the more “sensational” customs of many of the surrounding ethnic groups, encouraged anthropologists to focus their attention elsewhere. The coming of the Palaung to Thailand in the early 1980s thus provides a valuable opportunity to learn about the traditions of this relatively large Southeast Asian ethnic group.

The two earliest mentions of the Palaung in English publications are found in the works of Michael Symes (1800) and Henry Yule (1858). While neither man visited a
Palaung village, or met any Palaung people, they note some aspects of Palaung culture recounted to them in the course of their travels. While travelling down the Irrawaddy to Ava (near present day Mandalay), Symes was told that pickled tea “grows at a place called Palong-miou, a district to the northeast of Ummerapora; it is very inferior to the tea produced in China, and is seldom used but as a pickle” (1800: 273). Yules likewise describes the people living in the hills “east of Bamo and Koungtoun” as the “breeches-wearing Paloungs, peacably growing tea for the pickling” (1858: 275).

Scott and Hardiman (1900), under the entry “The Rumai or Palaungs” in the *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, give one of the earliest first hand accounts of the Palaung people. They also provide some early material regarding Palaung religious beliefs and practices. Scott and Hardiman report that the Palaung believe in a number of spirits, both male and female, all of whom have been given names, and that they are “fervent professing Buddhists” (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 491). They also describe the “great nat-feast” held in Nahmsan each year and the origin legend of the ruling Rumai group in Nahmsan (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 483, 491). A quote provided near the end of Scott and Hardimann’s (1900) entry may represent one of the earliest accounts of the Silver Palaung religion:

They are Buddhists. The western Shan character is taught in their monasteries. . . The Palwang do not seem to be great spirit-worshippers, though they make the usual offerings in case of sickness. They have no domestic hearth or alter to their ancestors, but the spirits of these are propitiated by offerings as well as the local spirits of the hills, rivers, &c (Mr. Sterling, quoted in Scott and Hardimann 1900: 493).
Lowis (1910) gives another early account of the Palaung, but describes little of their religious practices save the fact that they are “conspicuous among the hill tribes of this region by their universal adoption of Buddhism” (1910: 38). Enriquez (1923) provides some brief notes regarding the religious beliefs of the Palaung living on the Kodaung Hill Tracts in Moemeik who likewise may be Silver Palaung: ⁷

The Palaungs are Buddhists, but their Buddhism is much stricter than that of the Shans, and their Phoongyis [monks] indulge in none of the scandalous laxity of Shan monks. They have local Nats [spirits] peculiar to themselves, as, for instance, the spirit of a fugitive Sawbwa of Momeik who was murdered, and whose shrine is now seen in most Palaung villages (Enriquez 1923: 183).

In his report on an expedition to Asia, Davis (1940) makes mention of a Palaung community near Kalaw. While his notes concerning the Palaung are brief, he provides terms not found in other reports and relevant information regarding the religious beliefs of the Palaung in Burma. He writes that the “hamlet of Palaungs near Kalwa was composed of men adept at producing counter irritant charms called a-kwe a-ka for the bewilderment of witches. Their tattooed tigers could make you fall out of love, if you had been charmed into it. They could combat the terrible curse of “man-made-little,” which shrinks the soul in you until it rattles like a doll in the shell of your body. And these

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⁷ Enriquez’s description of the women’s clothing, “a blue jacket, skirt and gaiters, and a red collar. Cane hoops, and often a broad silver band, are worn around the waist. Some of the women wear red and blue caps, and others wear a small turban decorated with gay tassels. Girls leave the breast exposed until after marriage” (Enriquez 1923: 183), suggests the group he is describing is either Rumai or Pale.
Palaungs boasted they had cured a *baw-di-tha-da* [a man turned ghoul, known for their cruelty]” (Davis 1940: 68-69).

The first and only in-depth study of the Palaung was conducted in the early 1900s by Leslie Milne. Milne’s research centred on Nahmsan, the capital of the predominantly Palaung state of Tawnpeng. Milne published three works devoted to the Palaung: *An Elementary Palaung Grammar* (1921), *A Dictionary of English-Palaung and Palaung-English* (1931), and a lengthy ethnography entitled *The Home of an Eastern Clan: A Study of the Palaungs of the Shan States* (1924). Milne’s work focuses primarily on the Shwe Palaung and the Rumai, so cannot be used as an accurate baseline for the religious practices of the Silver Palaung living in northern Thailand. Nonetheless, judging from the close cultural and linguistic relationship between different groups of Palaung, it is likely that the practices and beliefs share many commonalties, and given the scarcity of other sources, the book provides an invaluable source of ethnographic data relating to Palaung culture in general.

**Palaung in Northern Thailand**

The Palaung living in northern Thailand refer to themselves as the “Dara’ang,” which means “people of the mountain.” The name is used by the Silver Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai as a meta-label for all Palaung sub-groups. It is difficult to say how long the Palaung have been in Burma. Originally from south-western China (Yunnan), legend has it that

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8 Although Milne was interested in the Palaung, she is better known for her earlier work on the Shan, *Shans at Home* (1910).

9 The term “Palaung” is used throughout the thesis. 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 “Dara-ang.” It should also be remembered that only Silver Palaung (Pale) live in Northern Thailand.
Figure 1: Shan State (Burma) and Northern Thailand
the Palaung originally settled near the present town of Namh Kam, Burma, close to the Chinese town Ruili. From there, the Palaung migrated to the area of present day Namhsan (Howard and Wattanapun 2001: 20).

Like many ethnic minority groups who migrated from 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) provide a detailed account of the problems that led the Palaung to migrate from Burma to Thailand. A summarised version of the problems and subsequent exodus is provided here.

While the Shan states have experienced a great deal of turmoil over the last two hundred years, the Palaung managed to remain relatively isolated from the conflicts. In Burma, the Palaung were technically under the same political system of the Shan (Leach’s gumsa system), whereby villages formed the smallest administrative unit within large principalities (muang) governed by a chaofa or sawba (Leach 1954: 57). While annual tribute was paid to the ruling princes, administration of the village was largely a local affair (Howard and Wattanapun 2001: 74).

The 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)\(^\text{10}\) in the south-eastern region of Shan State, Burma. Fighting in northern Burma began to affect them in the late 1970s when soldiers from Communist Party of Burma (CPB) came demanding food, shelter, and Palaung men to fight with them. Kham, the current headman of Pang Daeng Nai, was a headman back in Burma as well as the head of the collective six villages of Loi Lae. In light of heavy demands placed on the

\(^{10}\) “Loi” being Shan for “mountain.” In Northern Thailand the word is “Doi.”
Palaung by the CPB, and the subsequent reprisals by the Burmese army, Kham and the other headmen decided to relocate the villages to a more peaceful area.

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. Sporadic border conflicts and a shortage of land at Nor Lae caused groups of Palaung to move deeper into Thailand (Howard and Wattanapun 2001: 78). 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 (see Figure 1).

**Pang Daeng Nai**

Pang Daeng Nai is a small village located in Chiang Dao district, Chiang Mai province, approximately ten kilometres east of the district centre. The village was founded in 1985 by a group of Palaung migrating from nearby Mae Chon. The village was initially built on 12 rai of land purchased from a Lahu man. When it was founded, the village (known than simply as Pang Daeng) was comprised of only 12 households (Shila 1993). By 2003, it had grown to 49 households and 241 people.

The population of Pang Daeng Nai is relatively undifferentiated with regards to occupation, wealth, and class. Most people are farmers and seasonal labourers. While a village council, made up of seven elected men, meets often to discuss community issues,

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1 rai = 1600 square metres
Figure 2: Map of Pang Deang Nai Village
actual decisions are made by consensus at village wide meetings. Everyone is permitted to speak at these meetings, and as consensus is the goal, a single issue may be discussed at length for hours. Village wide meetings are also used to settle disputes within the village where mediation by relatives and friends has failed. Outside intervention in the form of police or government is rarely sought, except in cases involving outsiders.

Age and sex serve as the primary markers of status differentiation, with elders maintaining a higher ritual status than the younger generation. Table 1 below shows the age distribution by gender for Pang Dang Nai.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 34</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 59</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sex serves as another important source of status differentiation. Women are blocked from many religious positions by virtue of their exclusion from the *sangha* (monastic community). In the past, when living in Burma, this also meant that women were blocked
from gaining an education, as it was in the monasteries where young Palaung boys
learned to read and write. Today, Palaung children attend government run schools, with
girls receiving the same instruction as boys.

Children from Pang Daeng Nai attend Pang Daeng School with other children
from surrounding Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Thai villages. The school is located
approximately one kilometre east of the village, along the dirt road leading to the main
road and Pang Daeng Nok. Young children below the age of five speak only Pale, but
start to study Central Thai once in school. Consequently, most people under 30 years of
age can speak Central Thai. Almost everyone in the village, with the exception of kids
under six and a few of the older men and women, can speak Northern Thai. This is the
common language spoken in Chiang Dao district. Many people over the age of 35 can
also speak Tai Yai, reflecting their previous location. Some older men can read and write
Tai Yai and use a modified form of the Shan alphabet to write Pale. One elderly man in
the village can speak Burmese and Chinese. Several men also claim to understand Lahu,
but no one can speak it fluently.

**Household**

Palaungs are tied to their village to a much greater extent than the Thais in the
surrounding area would be. Due to their non-citizen status their movement is severely
restricted. Palaung men and women are not allowed to travel to urban centers to find
employment. Residence is patrilocal, limiting marriage relocation to women. As the
Palaungs rarely marry outside their group, even these exchanges are limited, restricting
relocation primarily to six locations.
Traditionally, Palaung lived in long houses containing as many as four or five families. While one long house has been built in Nor Lae, such houses are generally no longer constructed in northern Thailand. Houses in Pang Daeng Nai are of similar construction to that described by Milne (1924: 180) for Palaung in Burma. Most houses are made of wood and slit bamboo with roofs constructed from thatch or zinc sheets. It is increasingly common to build houses with metal roofs, as the thatch tends to leak in the rainy season and must be changed every two or three years. Some households, however, maintain the thatch roofs, as they are much cooler in the hot season. The indoor hearth (hreng) is increasingly less common, as people prefer to cook in a separate section of the house.

Houses generally contain two bedrooms, one for the parents and one for their children. People try to sleep with their head facing the river as it “cools the head” and helps them sleep better. Another room is often created inside the house by raising the floor in the living entrance-room. This creates a two-room effect, with the upper section being used for guests to sleep on. The raised platform also serves to divide the room into upper and lower levels, the upper being a more a more prestigious position. The family altar (yang phra) is commonly placed in this section of the house. During sermons monks also occupy the raised section of the house, where seated on a dai which places them even higher. Several times a year, when children travel to the houses of elders for blessings, the elder is likewise seated on this higher level.

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12 Milne (1924: 180) describes one-family Palaung houses in Burma as containing a “large entrance-room – the living-room of the family – and one or two smaller rooms at the back” used for sleeping. In one family houses there are “two verandas, a large on in the front, by which strangers enter, and a smaller one behind, where dishes and pots may be washed and where work of all kinds is done” (Milne 1924: 180). She also notes the presence of “two fireplaces, one in the middle of the outer room where food is cooked and round which people sit, the other in one of the inner rooms; this is not used unless some one in the family is ill” (Milne 1924: 180).
Most houses maintain a small spirit house in the yard and a family altar for Buddha images inside their home. The small spirit houses are known by their Thai name jaw thi, which means “lord of the place.” The houses are of simple construction, often made from few pieces of wood, 30 to 60 cm³ supported on a single pole and covered by a metal roof. Ideally, offerings of rice and water are offered to the jaw thi each day, but in practice the offerings are made more sporadically. The jaw thi are thought to protect the inhabitants from misfortune.

The household altar, found within every Palaung home in Pang Daeng Nai, 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, 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 raised section of the main living area. Milne gives prescriptions for the direction of the altar based on the day the household owner was born (Milne 1924: 183). 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.

On the evening before and the morning of wan sin¹³ (“wan” meaning “day,” and “sin” meaning “precept”), Palaung men and women regularly light three candles and burn

¹³ Except for Songkhran, Palaung holy days typically follow the lunar calendar. One lunar year is divided into twelve months; even numbered months have thirty days and odd-numbered months twenty-nine. Because the lunar calendar is shorter than the solar calendar, an intercalary eighth lunar month is observed every third year.
three incense in front of the altar. Each family member is also expected to make an offering to the Buddha. Older men and women also take this opportunity to “say beads,” which involves counting out prayers on a string of 108 Buddhist prayer beads. A bit of food, in the form of rice and water, is also offered. On days that are particularly holy (wan sin yaay during the Buddhist Lenten season, for example), all family members make a special offering. This is done by placing fruit and a bit of money on a tray, kneeling before the alter, and raising the tray up to one’s head and saying a short prayer before placing it on the ground before the alter.

Though today the household altars are used for the Buddhist images, Kham says he sometimes prays to ancestors as well, asking them for help. He recalls that once these altars were the place for ancestors, but the practice has died out. The practice of giving offerings to generalised ancestors is common among Tai in Burma and Thailand, and the Lawa (Davis 1984: 63 for Northern Thai; Kauffmann 1977: 212 for the Lawa; Tannenbaum 1995: 62 for Shan; Terweil 1994: 126 for Central Thai). In her study of the Palaung, Milne (1924) notes that “Ancestor worship, as practised by the Chinese, is unknown among the Palaungs” (Milne 1924: 356). While it is true that Palaung ancestor “worship” does not approximate a Chinese model, it may have been more of a private affair within Palaung households. The discrepancy may also reflect an influence of other cultural traditions on the villages of Loi Lae (Chinese, Shan, or other upland groups).

There are four wan sin a month, observed on the full, dark, and half moons. Those on full and dark moons are known as wan sin yaay (“large precept day”) and those on half moons as wan sin noy (“small precept
Village

Palaung villages in Thailand differ considerably with regards to material and spiritual conditions. Some villages, such as Pang Daeng Nai, own their own farmland, while others, such as Pang Daeng Nok and Suan Cha, rely more on selling their labour for income. Palaungs in Pang Daeng Nai are also proud of the moral quality of their village. This includes the continuation of traditional practices other villages have neglected, including the maintenance of Buddhist practices and institutions within the village.

After its founding, Pang Daeng Nai was quick to construct a space for communal Buddhist ceremonies. The temple grounds are located in the north-eastern corner of the village (see Figure 2 for village layout). Like in Burma, the monastery is located at the edge of the village. In Pang Daeng Nai, the temple grounds consist of an old, slit bamboo temple which now serves as a 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 the monks' quarters, consisting of two raised houses. Recently, a small building for general living was constructed next to the two 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.

At the centre of the village is a post known as the ho teur (Plate 1). The ho teur of Pang Daeng Nai resembles quite closely the lak muang widespread among Tai groups (see Terweil 1978: 166), and it is possible that the form was borrowed from the Tai. The term “ho teur,” however, is a Palaung word meaning “prime post,” and given the ubiquity of central village markers amongst Southeast Asian cultures it is likely that the practice
predates the Tai form in some way or another. The ho teur houses a guardian spirit, but it is nameless and not propitiated. The ho teur becomes the centre of activity only once a year, during the song krau ceremony discussed in Chapter Four.

To the north of the village is the residence of the tsao muang, or “lord of the village” (Plate 2). The shrine comes into play twice a year at the spirit feeding (hiang karnam) ceremonies held just before and just after the Buddhist Lenten season (pansa). The exact date is determined according to what the spirit eats. Each day is associated with the feeding of a particular type of spirit. Spirits may eat chickens, ducks, dogs, pigs, buffalo, elephants, horses, people, or even other spirits. The spirit of Pang Daeng Nai eats chickens, reflecting the smaller size of the village. Villages with more than 200 houses generally propitiate pig-eating spirits. There are no charts in Pang Daeng Nai. The headman calculates the date from memory. The dates chosen in Pang Daeng Nai nonetheless appear similar those reported by Davis (1976: 24) for the Northern Thai.

The hiang karnam ceremony deals with three separate groups of spirits, the tsao muang being only the first. The other two spirits are the karnam phrae, who is the spirit of the forest, and the kaña raw, the spirit of the houses. The kaña raw is represented by a small altar set up in front of the tsao muang shrine while the karnam phrae is propitiated by setting up two bamboo posts topped with flowers wrapped in banana leaf before a large tree several meters in front of the tsao muang complex. The tsao muang shrine consists of two small raised houses surrounded by a bamboo fence. The taller house is said to be that of the tsao muang and his wife, while the lower one is their child. This

14 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 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.
explanation coincides with one given by Milne (1924) of a spirit near Nahmsan: “[T]he Ta Sō Mōng (or Sa-mōng) and his wife, a pair of spirits that have children. The Ta Sō-Mōng is not only a guardian spirit of the State of Tawngpeng, but he is worshipped also in all the Palaung districts of the Kodaung” (Milne 1924: 349). On the top of the houses is a set of horns known as ra ka nuang (nuang meaning horns). The shrine was chosen as an auspicious site because the trees there formed natural corners and the presence of a termite mount reflecting the presence of powerful natural forces and spirits.

Another communal spirit shrine is dedicated to karnain u'm (“spirit of the water”) (Plate 3). This shrine is located a kilometre south-east of the village, next to the river that supplies drinking water to the village. This shrine resembles the tsao muang, except that it only has one house. It is also much newer, being constructed 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. Consequently, all households now have access to clean drinking water. Before this system, villagers fetched water from another nearby stream.

**Economy and Livelihood**

Pang Daeng Nai is located within a designated economic zone inside of Sri Lana National Park. The economic zone was created following the arrest of 29 Palaung men from Pang Daeng Nai and Pang Daeng Nok in 1989. Along with other non-Palaung men from nearby communities, the men were charged with forest encroachment and sentenced to eleven years in prison. This sentence was later reduced. In total, the 56 men from the area in and around Pang Daeng spent three years, six months, and eighteen days in prison. While the arrests had a negative impact on many households, the village has recovered as the land
set aside by the government for agricultural use around Pang Daeng Nai has been
developed.

Table 2 shows the distribution of owned land amongst households in Pang Daeng
Nai.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Number of Rai Owned by household</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No land owned</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 rai</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10 rai</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 15 rai</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 20 rai</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 rai</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing data for 10 households
Data collected by household survey January 2003
1 rai = 1600 sq. meters

In addition to owned land, several houses rent land from Lahu and Northern Thai for
approximately 200 to 500 baht a rai per year. The amount of rented land is shown in
Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Number of Rai Rented</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 rai</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10 rai</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing data for 10 households
Data collected by household survey January 2003
1 rai = 1600 sq. meters
In Burma, the primary crop of the Palaung was pickled tea (Milne 1924: 230). Scott and Hardiman (1900: 491-492) provide a legend associated with the tea where the great lord Yamadi-kyè-thu upon visiting Loi-Seng near Tawngpeng, gave a seed found in the throat of a dead bird to two Pa-o Karen hunters. As the hunters held out only one hand to receive the gift, rather than two "as etiquette and respect demanded," the great lord revoked their gift. The plant, which came to be called "Let-hpet" (an altered form of "Let-tit-pet," which means "one hand"), was then given to the Palaung. The tea tree, shown in Milne (1924: facing p. 226), that grew from the seed is still considered sacred and an annual feast is held at the site around March.

Milne (1926: 227-8) provides a detailed description of how tea is grown and pickled. Tea production became the principle crop of the Palaung following developments associated with British colonisation, and remained a principle crop for the Palaung of Loi Lae prior to their migration to Thailand (Howard and Wattanapun 2001: 29). As pickled tea is no longer popular in northern Thailand, they no longer produce it. Some Palaung communities grew tea for awhile immediately after migrating to Thailand, but found that other crops were more economical, as the market is dominated by the Chinese migrants in the Mae Salong. Nor Lae was a large producer of tea until 2002, when it ploughed the crops under to plant flowers for sale in Bangkok. Some Palaung still grow tea in their gardens, but this is for household use only and usually does not even meet the consumption needs of the family.

The villagers in Pang Daeng Nai primarily grow maize, red beans, pai yii, black beans, peanuts, mangoes, and rice. In addition to these crops, the UHDP has set up an example crop of fruit trees. Labour in the fields is reciprocal. Friends and siblings commonly help each other plough, plant, and harvest the fields. Some villagers hire other
Palaung during periods of intense labour. A few hire full time labourers, mainly Lahu and Palaung from Pang Daeng Nok, to take care of their fields. The hiring of labour is quite rare, and a shortage of labour and no funds to hire workers is a common complaint.

While many early observers report that the Palaung are vegetarians (Cameron 1912: 27-28; Lowis 1906; and Milne 1924: 192-3), this is not the case in northern Thailand. In addition to crops, families raise chickens that are butchered for sale, household consumption, and ceremonies. Most families own at least one pig which is also sold or eaten during funerals, weddings, and festivals, or when meat has become too expensive to buy on market. In 2003, a kilogram of pig sold in the village for 50 baht.\(^{15}\) Men also go out early in the morning hunting birds and rabbits, which are consumed by the households.

Many villagers also work outside the village as day labourers, for which they are paid 120 baht a day. Two families have set up small shops in the village, where they make extra money selling snacks, soda, water, instant noodles, beer, and rice whisky. Tourism brings in extra money for most families. Half of the households (24 out of 49) reported selling handicrafts to tourists. These include jewellery, pipes, and home-made bags (\textit{who}) and skirts (\textit{glangh}). The women of the village usually sell these products. Three households have built guesthouses, where they charge 20 baht a night for each guest. Trekking groups who come through are entertained by children who sing traditional Palaung songs and Thai pop songs. The children get paid 10 baht a piece for participating (Siregar 2001).

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\(^{15}\) At the time of my research 26 baht was equivalent to 1 Canadian dollar.
Village Specialists

There are few specialist positions in Pang Daeng Nai. The village is represented by a headman, Lung Kham. The position of headman is decided in sporadically held local elections. In Pang Daeng Nai, there has not been such an election for a long time, as Kham has been encouraged to remain in his position, despite his own desire to step down. The headman acts as the mediator between the village and the government in Chiang Dao district office.

There are two ritual specialist roles in Pang Daeng Nai: the *ajaan* and the *da bu muang*. The *ajaan* is the lay Buddhist specialist responsible for overseeing all Buddhist ceremonies. This includes sermons held at the temple, the chanting of monks in the houses of villagers, and the annual *song krau* ritual coinciding with the Songkran Festival. Besides overseeing the preparations for the ceremonies, the *ajaan* leads the congregation in reading certain texts (see Tambiah 1970: 133-134 for a list of texts read by Thai *ajaan* in north-eastern Thailand). A-Tan, who goes by the name Tama while he is functioning in the role, fills the position in the village. In Pang Daeng Nai a man has to have been a full monk to be qualified for the position of *ajaan*.

The *da bu muang* is the spirit specialist and is responsible for ceremonies dealing with spirits, such as the biannual feeding of the village guardian spirit (*tsao muang*) and the annual feeding of the water spirit (*karnam u'm*). He also assists with weddings and household exorcisms. In Pang Daeng Nai an elderly man named Lung Yok fills this position. While the position is not necessarily hereditary, it generally functions this way as fathers instruct sons on the proper ritual techniques. Lung Yok learnt the proper
techniques from his father, whose father before him was also a *da bu muang*. It is expected that one of Lung Yok’s sons will take over the position once he dies.

One other position usually found in Palaung villages is that of the *hsara*. This man typically conducts exorcisms and seances for healing illnesses caused by spirits. Pang Daeng Nai does not have a *hsara*. There is one active *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: 178). These particularities are no longer of much interest to the Palaung living in Thailand.

**Cross-cultural Lexicon**

It is interesting to note that many terms presented in the above section are borrowed from the lowland cultures. “*Ajaan*” is a common Tai word used in reference to high level instructors. It likely comes from the Sanskrit term *acarya* (Terweil 1994: 261). The term *hsara* comes from the Burmese term *hsaya*, meaning “teacher” (Milne 1924: 244). Spiro likewise notes that the term “*hsaya*” is used in Burmese as a suffix when referring to any expert (Spiro 1967: 23). Finally, the term *da bu muang* may be related to the Shan term “*phu muong*” reported by Durrenberger (1980: 53) and Tannenbaum (1995: 49). 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: 49). 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: 52). 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.

The above demonstrates the considerable borrowing between the Palaung and other lowland cultures, not only with regards to Buddhist practices, but also spirit practices as well. One may also look to the term for the village guardian spirit, the *tsao muang*. The word is a Shan term, “*tsao*” meaning “lord” and “*muang*” meaning “land” or “territory” (Cushing 1914: 170). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine these issues in detail, this serves as a warning to those who assume that the present spirit ceremonies of the Palaung are reflections of a pre-Buddhist past.
Leslie Milne 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: 312). She believes, however, that the Palaung knew of Buddhism before this time since it had been introduced to the Shan in adjacent states for over two centuries already (1924: 312). As Howard and Wattanapun (2001: 42) point out, the Palaung have a history of being influenced by both Shan and Burmese forms of Buddhism. This is reflected in the fact that both forms are found among the Palaung in Burma, with the groups living in the north of Burma primarily influenced by the Burmese school, and the others, including the Silver Palaung, influenced by what Dodd (1923: 75) calls the “Yuan” form of Buddhism. “Yuan” Buddhism is found throughout the Tai speaking lands of northern Thailand, Laos, southern China, and Shan State of Kengtung from where the Palaung living in northern Thailand migrated (Keys 1971: 551). It differs from the Central Thai and Burmese Buddhist traditions in its religious script, the structure of its rituals, and the organisation of its clergy.

The Buddha

The term “Buddhism” comes from the word “Buddha,” a generic term referring to any person who has escaped the cycle of rebirth. In Pang Daeng Nai, the idea of whom or
what Buddha is differs depending on whom you speak with. Most villagers distinguish between Siddatha Gotama, the princely renunciate of northern India who founded the religion, and the “Chinese Buddha,” Maiteya, who is the Buddha to come. Elderly men in Pang Daeng Nai, who have spent time as monks back in Burma, can recall the names of the previous three Buddhas before Gotama (Kokasan, Konapkung, and Kassapa), as well as the future Buddha, Maiteya.16

The Buddha is not a creator god and his status as an enlightened being means he is technically out of touch with humanity. Despite his entry into nibbana, most Palaung believe that the Buddha can be prayed to for help in times of need, a view that, as Halder points out, does not necessarily contravene the scriptures (Halder 1977: 129-30). Some elders explain it is not Siddatha Gotama who answers prayers but the future Buddha, Maiteya, who is currently residing in heaven. In any event, theological inconsistencies such as these are not a major preoccupation of most villagers and many who admit that the Buddha cannot help them nonetheless pray to him for health, wealth, and happiness.

Kammic Buddhism

The Buddha is a revered figure because he discovered the means for escaping from the cycle of rebirth. All beings, whether humans, gods, or animals, are subject to the cosmic law of kamma (Pali, karma in Sanskrit), which translates literally as “action” but today refers to the cosmic law of cause and effect. Good deeds produce good results for the doer, while bad deeds bring about undesirable conditions. The operative force behind kamma is

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16 Halder (1977: 131) mentions six Buddha’s before Gotama mentioned in the texts: Vipassa, Sikhi, Vessabhu, Kakusandha, Konagamana, and Kassapa. Terweil mentions five Buddha’s previous to Gotama, leaving out Vessabhu. He further notes that only the later three were known to his informants at Wat Sanchao (Terweil 1995: 268).
merit (*bun*). Merit is a "force" which accumulates through good deeds and works itself out in the form of favoured circumstances in one's present and future lives. A lesser emphasis is placed on avoiding demerit (*baap*) which comes with bad deeds.

While an exact ranking of meritorious actions is difficult to provide,\(^7\) there is a general agreement among scholars that the amount of merit gained is related to the value of the gift (Mulder 1973; Terweil 1994: 216).\(^8\) Besides gift giving, individuals acquire merit by attending sermons, reading scriptures, praying, and meditating.

Merit ranks individuals within a social structure. A person who is rich, attractive, and healthy is generally regarded as having made a lot of merit in previous lives. It is thus

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\(^7\) Kaufman (1960: 183-184) asked 25 Thai adults to rank ten items along a merit maximising continuum. The results were, from most meritorious to least:

1. Becoming a monk
2. Contributing enough money for the construction of a *wat*
3. Having a son ordained as a monk
4. Making excursions to the Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand
5. Contributing towards the repair of a *wat*
6. Giving food, daily, to the monks and giving food on holy days
7. Becoming a novice
8. Attending a *wat* on all holy days and obeying the eight laws on these days
9. Obeying the five laws at all times
10. Giving money and clothing to the monks at the *Thaud Kathin*

Tambiah (1970: 147) similarly asked 79 family heads to rank eight items, producing the following in descending order from most merit to least:

1. Financing entire building of a *wat*
2. Becoming a monk oneself
3. Having a son become a monk
4. Contributing money to the repair of a *wat*
5. Making gifts at a *kathin* ceremony
6. Giving food daily to monks
7. Observing every *wanphraa* at the *wat*
8. Strict observance of the five precepts

Critics have noted, however, that these lists are much too short and general to be of much use (see Potter 1976: 36; Sharp and Hanks 1978: 280; Terweil 1994: 215). Terweil (1994: 215) further points out a number of ways in which the villagers may have interpreted the options quite differently from the researchers.
the case that a person who already has a lot of merit (reflected in his or her wealth) is in a better position to make more merit in his or her current life, while a poor person (reflecting low levels of merit) is denied such opportunities. Lehman refers to this progressive inequality as the “economy of merit” (Lehman 1996: 29).

The Spirit of Buddhism

The Palaung believe in a personal spirit known as karphraw which remains continuous throughout rebirth cycles. Milne (1926) reports a similar term, “kar-bu,” used by the Palaung of Nahmsan for the spirit of animals and humans. This spirit passes through innumerable bodies, including animals, minerals, and ethereal beings, before being born in a human shell (Milne 1924: 335). In the past, such a belief prevented Palaung from killing any animals (Lowis 1906: 14, Milne 1924: 335). A spirit that resides in neither a human nor an animal is known as a karnam. The Palaung in Pang Daeng Nai use the term karnam in reference to the spirit of plants, minerals, and ghosts.

The villagers describe the karphraw as analogous to the Thai concept khwan, which has often been described as consisting of 32 parts. The elders of Pang Daeng Nai

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18 Bowie (1998) provides a dissenting opinion on this view. With regards to the northern Thai, Bowie writes “many villagers stress intention and relative ability to give. . . [P]oor villagers where I lived were adamant that the poor gave far more in proportion to their ability than did the rich” (Bowie 1998: 474). She does not, however, say this translates into more merit for the poor, simply that they are being “more generous.” Similarly, Ingersoll (1975: 228) points out that while valuable gifts do equal more merit, the merit received also depends on “the purity of one’s mind while performing” the giving act.

19 Terweil (1967: 42) translates the term khwan as “ego,” “soul,” “morale,” “grace,” or “prosperity.” Davis (1970: 67) translates it as “psychic essence.” The number 32 is problematic. Rajadhon (1962: 143) believes the notion of khwan comes from the Chinese word kwan which is written with the characters “vapour” and “demon,” but believes the number thirty-two is derived from Buddhism. However, as Lafont (1955: 807) reports, the non-Buddhist Black Tai also possess 32 khwan. Kirsch notes that “the concept of khwan bears striking similarities to the sophisticated Buddhist notion of khandha, the “aggregates” or “buddles” that make of the individual” (1977: 253). Though only five khandha, one of them (Sankhara) is internally complex and constituted of many elements.
maintain that the karphraw is indivisible, consisting of only one part. This is interesting, as Milne reports that Palaung in Nahmsan conceptualise the kar-bu as also being composed of 32 parts (Milne 1926: 336). It may be that karphraw as one predates the conception of karphraw as 32, and that the group Milne was working with were more influenced by the Shan conception of spirit than other, more remote, Palaung groups. It may also be the result of individual interpretations and memories, as very few people have any knowledge regarding this point. Some elders of the village are also familiar with the Pali concept of vinyan (viññana Pali), but maintain that these are essentially the same things (see Davis (1970) and Tambiah (1967) for discussions of khwan and viññana among Thai groups).

Nibbana

For the Palaung, and other Theravada Buddhists, ultimate salvation does not lay in the karphraw going to heaven, but in the state of nibbana (Pali; nirvana in Sanskrit), a term commonly translated as “extinction of the self.” Nibbana is a state (or non-state) where the spirit is free from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The term nibbana is difficult to define for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. While it is commonly translated as “extinction,” Rahula (1988) argues that this is misleading and arises from the fact that the scriptures generally speak of nibbana in negative terms rather than positive. Likewise, the doctrine of no-soul or no-self (anatta in Pali) suggests that this “extinction” is not a destruction of self, but realising that the self is an illusion to begin with. Whatever the nature of nibbana, it is widely agreed upon as the ultimate goal for Buddhists.

Individual Palaung men and women hold a variety of ideas concerning the nature of nibbana. Milne (1924) notes that the Palaung in Burma “differ in their beliefs as to Ni-
ban, some believing it to be a state of happiness in which the blessed will remember their past lives and recognize those whom they have known and loved in the past ages” (Milne 1924: 317). In my own experience, few thought of nibbana as a heavenly state where people could meet loved ones. The most common answer I received was “I really don’t know” but everyone believed it was nonetheless a very desirable state.

That Palaung men and women believe it to be a desirable state does not mean that they are likely to strive towards nibbana in this lifetime. It takes many aeons to reach nibbana, so most men and women contend with acquiring good merit (bun) in the hopes of a better rebirth. As Keyes (1995) writes, “Nirvana is a very remote goal, a goal that can only be achieved after many, many existences. . . That most find that they can travel only a little way along the Path reflects their realistic appraisal that they are still bound to sentient existence” (Keyes 1995: 86).

**Palaung Buddhism in Thailand**

In Burma, young boys learned their knowledge of Buddhism “by being scholars in Palaung monasteries, then by spending months or even years in the monasteries of Rangoon and Mandalay” (Milne 1924: 315). In Thailand, the monasteries no longer act as centres of education. Some young boys still spend a period as novices, but these numbers are low. Part of the problem has been the lack of a fully functioning temple within the village. Although Pang Daeng Nai has maintained a temple in some form for over ten years, there were no monks living in the village until first week of June, 2003, when a Palaung monk came from a Palaung monastery in Mandalay, Burma. He had spent a year in Mae Leam, a larger Palaung village in Fang District, before settling in Paeng Daeng
Nai. In addition, a novice monk from Pang Daeng Nai, who had been staying at a temple near Nor Lae, returned to Pang Deang Nai after the older monk took up residence.

Before Pang Daeng Nai had a monk of its own, older Palaung men and women often travelled 30 km to Wat Den ("wat" being the Thai term for "temple") to attend sermons on wan sin. Wat Den derives its popularity from its abbot, Khuu Baa Jaw Teung (1965–present), a young monk who is held in great esteem by the Palaung in northern Thailand. Keyes (1971) writes that "khu ba" means "esteemed teacher" and refers to "monks whose reputation, often for presumed magical powers, attracted large followings" (Keyes 1971: 553). It interesting to note that in Burma the Palaung have come to revere the friend of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung, Khuu Baa Muang Chum, who reputedly had to flee Thailand some years back.

The Palaung of Pang Daeng Nai first met Khuu Baa Jaw Teung in 1989 when he came to nearby Doi Prabhat (Prabhat Mountain) to build a chedi, a project which the Palaung supplied a great deal of labour to complete. After subsequent meetings, Khuu Baa Jaw Teung became a patron of Buddhism in Pang Daeng Nai. He supplied money for the construction of a new temple in 2001 and invited Pang Daeng Nai to send young boys to become novices at Wat Den. In 2003, there were five Palaung novices at the temple, all from Pang Daeng Nai.

The Palaung in Thailand believe Khuu Baa Jaw Teung to be the reincarnation of Khuu Baa Siwichai. A popular amulet given out at festivals at Wat Den shows an image of Khuu Baa Siwichai on one side and an image of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung on the other. I have been told by many Palaung that one of the signs of this reincarnation is that Khuu Baa Jaw Teung was born shortly after the death of Khuu Baa Siwichai. I am unclear as to
whether Khuu Baa Jaw Teung himself supports this claim, as monks are not supposed to
claim they are reincarnations of specific figures (Erik Cohen, personal communication).
Nonetheless, the Palaung themselves believe this to be the case and there is appears to be
an effort on some level to construct such a connection by Wat Den.\textsuperscript{21}

The connection is important for understanding Palaung Buddhism in northern
Thailand. Khuu Baa Siwichai, born in 1874, is one of northern Thailand’s most famous
monks. He is well known for resisting central Thai forms of Buddhism in the north and
Bangkok’s attempts to integrate the northern Thai temples under a central authority
(Keyes 1971: 553). During the early half of the 20th century, Khuu Baa Siwichai rebuilt
temples and \textit{chedis} throughout the north, an act emulated by Khuu Baa Jaw Teung
(Renard 1996: 176). Khuu Baa Siwichai’s best known project is the road up Suthep
Mountain west of Chiang Mai in 1938. Renard writes that by this time “his followers
were legion and thousands helped build the road. Northern Thai, Karen, and members of
other ethnic groups all participated” (Renard 1996: 176).

There are several important points concerning the link between Khuu Baa Jaw
Teung and Khuu Baa Siwichai. The first is that Khuu Baa Siwichai was a defender of the
Yuan form of Buddhism. The practices at Wat Den likewise reflect the Yuan form of
Buddhism, the same form practised by the Pale in Burma. Secondly, Khuu Baa Jaw
Teung, like Khuu Baa Siwichai, maintains a considerable following among the ethnic
minority groups. Finally, and I believe related to the last point, Khuu Baa Siwichai’s

\textsuperscript{20} Conical \textit{chedis} often serve as reliquaries for Buddha relics or the remains of prominent monks.

\textsuperscript{21} Amulets depicting Khuu Baa Jaw Teung on one side and Khuu Baa Siwichai on the other are often
disseminated at temple fairs. While this may point simply to a teaching line, Temple newsletters also speak
of the conditions of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung’s birth and early childhood as evidence that he is the
reincarnation of Khuu Baa Siwichai.
popularity stems from the fact that his powers were helpful in this world (see Cohen 1991 for related discussion). As Renard wrote,

Khuba Siwichai combined belief in magic with a good understanding of the tenets of Buddhism. . . while a young monk, he had studied magic from Khuba Khaeng Khrae, a noted older monk. . . Khuba Siwichai saw spirits, magic, and the Buddha existing in a unified cosmological order, a synthesis that many other monks, both Northern and Central Thai, did see (Renard 1996: 75).

Palaung Buddhism is also very much concerned with the practical power of Buddhism.

**Festive Buddhism**

Temple fairs and festivals are a common feature of Buddhism in Thailand. The annual festival held at Wat Den in honour of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung’s birthday is attended by most Palaung living in Thailand, and even a few from Burma. The festival is an important occasion for Palaung to see friends, family, and for some younger men and women, to find romance. Part of this festival is geared directly towards the Palaung, with a sermon given exclusively for them. Those attending also receive domestic supplies (dried noodles, blankets, soap, and medicines), as well as amulets bearing the image of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung and Khuu Baa Siwichai, and red bracelets with five white beads known as a *haa sin* (“five precept”) amulet.²²

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²² This bracelet acts on other people, causing them to respect the five precepts (not to kill, lie, steal, intoxicate, or cheat) when interacting with the wearer.
While festivals are a common event in Shan and Northern Thai villages, they have been largely absent from Palaung villages, mostly due to lack of funds. This is unfortunate, as festivals provide a valuable source of inter-village links, both within the small group of Palaung villages, and Palaung links to nearby Northern Thai communities. As Palaung villages become more established, however, inter-village festivals are becoming more common, and local festivals, such as Songkran, are becoming more elaborate.

On March 26, 2003, Pang Daeng Nai held a large village festival (bloe), the first of its kind since the migration to Thailand. This festival coincided with the visit of Khuu Baa Jaw Teung to the village. As the festival was a Buddhist celebration, other local highland minority groups living around Pang Daeng Nai were excluded from the festival, while Northern Thais from Chiang Dao and Wat Den area were invited (an exception was made for Palaungs at Pang Daeng Nok, who have converted to Christianity).

The fair was sponsored largely by Khuu Baa Jaw Teung, who donated funds, food, and equipment for the event. In preparation for the fair, a stage was constructed near the temple and a kitchen area was built in order to feed the hundreds of visitors who would attend. The entire village was decorated with flags made by the local women using thread purchased in Chiang Dao. The most popular flags are the tung chedi, or “chedi flags,” which in addition to chedis, depict pictures of Palaung homes, the Bodhi tree, or the Thai national flag. I have seen in Ma Leam other flags that depict pictures from Palaung
traditional folktales, but none were created in Pang Daeng Nai. Other flag designs include *banday sawan*,\(^23\) or "stairway to heaven," and the thread square flags.\(^24\)

One of the unusual aspects of this particular festival involved Khuu Baa Jaw Teung’s visit to the *chedi* at Doi Phrabat. Every year the Palaung go to the *chedi* around March to pray for rain. This practice is linked to an event that took place during the founding of the village. As Kham Hieng relates:

> When we first came here, when we were at Mae Joan, for about five or six months we had no rain. Monks came to the cave temple at Doi Phrabat. Lungyot [spirit specialist] and I went and prayed for rain with the monks. We slept in the cave temple. The next day, without rain, a flood of water came gushing down the dry riverbed. True story (Kham, Headman of Pang Daeng Nai. April 2003).\(^25\)

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\(^{23}\) These flags are built by wrapping coloured thread around a three-dimensional bamboo frame. They represent Buddha’s descent from *tavatimsa* heaven, where he went to teach the *dhamma* to his mother and the gods.

\(^{24}\) These squares are found common in Northern Thailand and Burma (see Kaufmann 1980). The squares are constructed by winding coloured thread (blue, orange, yellow, red, white, and black) around two small pieces of crossed bamboo. Several of these coloured squares, approximately 25 x 25 cm each, are then linked together to form long banners. Small pom-poms or frills are then attached to the corners where each square meets before attaching the banner to a long bamboo pole.

\(^{25}\) Note the similarities in the founding myth for the Palaung city of Nahmsan in Burma as presented in the Kangwantok Chronicle:

> We are told that at Pang-nawn, as they neared Tawngpeng, they found no water. ‘It was already dark, but the Chief, trusting to his virtue, invoked the spirits, saying, ‘I love my people very much. Be merciful, and cause water to come forth that they may drink.’ He trimmed a bamboo pole, and, when he thrust the sharpened end into the ground, water gushed forth out of the hollow bamboo as from a spout. Not only did the people drink, but there was plenty of water in which to bathe’ (Milne 1924: 19).
This ceremony used to be performed in a nearby cave temple (Wat Tung), also located on Doi Phrabat, but has been held at the chedi since its construction. In 2003, Khuu Baa Jaw Teung led the ceremony, which consists of reciting Pali scriptures and wrapping a new monks robe around the chedi. This particular ceremony demonstrates not only the protective power of Buddhism, but also its productive power. Overall, this particular ritual was a success; it rained the next day.
CHAPTER FOUR: 
SONGKLAN FESTIVAL

Every April, the countries of Thailand, Burma, and Laos 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 south-western China. Milne (1926) 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, than go down the hill again for more (Milne 1924: 219).

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

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26 In 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.
herself witness the festival, as she commonly 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 proportions, as thousands of people line the moat to fish buckets of water with which to douse any passer-by. While the 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 recognise the occasion as a sacred time of the year. Water throwing is minimal, as there is little water to throw at this time of the year.

In the past, abstaining from alcohol was one of ten prohibitions associated with Songkran. According to the elders, during the festival one should not do the following from sunrise to sunset: no killing [includes animals], 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: 25).
Today, only a few men and women still follow these prescriptions. Those that do are primarily older men and women who are trying to preserve the old traditions and several young men whose tattoos are too powerful to drink alcohol during religious festivals (see Tannenbaum 1987: 698 for discussion of precept keeping and tattoos). For most, it is an occasion to attend festivals in Chiang Dao, relax, and party late into the night.

**Origins of Songkran**

The word “Songkran” is derived from the Sanskrit term *sankranta*, which designates the passing of the sun from the sign of Pisces to Aries (Rajadhon 1961: 92). 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: 251), 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 likely origin of the Songkran festival is the Holi festival celebrated in India. The Holi festival involves the throwing of coloured water and powder similar to what one sees in Thailand. The Holi festival is associated with Kama, the Love God, and Krishna, who reportedly celebrated the festival himself with the girls of the cowherds in Vraja. On
a different level, the Holi festival represents an exorcism, whereby an effigy of the witch Holika (a child-eating raksasa) is burnt in bonfires (Bowker 1997: 435). Basham reports that during the Holi festival, “respectable citizens forgot their caste restrictions, and paraded the streets scattering red powder over their neighbours, squirting them with coloured water, and playing all kinds of practical jokes” (1967: 207).

Whether or not the festival is in fact connected to Holi, the Songkran origin myths of the Thai and Burmese reflect many Hindu elements. 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: 170-171).

In Burma, the origin myth for the Thingyan festival is similar to that given by Rajadhon (1986: 170-71) for the Thais. However, the Burmese myth has a preface

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27 In Pang Daeng Nai, one man who had received a particularly powerful tattoo known as a sua haa bot ("five marks of the tiger") often got into fights at Buddhist festivals when he drank. He was told by his father that this was because he was breaking the precept concerning abstaining from alcohol during a Buddhist festival, thus causing him losing control. This tattoo was said to already cause him to get into fights. As a result, he could not drink during Songkran or other Buddhist festive days.
wherein the King of the Gods, Thagyamin, comes to earth each year to visit the gods who may not return to heaven because they have eaten the “sweet-smelling soil of earth.” The Thingyan festival marks Thagyamin’s annual visit (Htin Aung 1959: 27). In this myth, a wager is made between the Red Brahma (also known as Asi Brama, “asī” being Sanskrit for “sword”) and Thagyamin, the King of the Gods, over whether a week contains seven or eight days for the purposes of astrological calculations. To settle the issue, the two gods consult a great astrologer on earth. The astrologer declares that for astrological calculations, a week contains seven days. Thagyamin subsequently cuts off the head of the Red Brahma and replaces it with that of an elephant (effectively adopting Ganesh into Burmese mythology, who becomes known as Maha Pinne). As the head is too hot to touch the ground, it must be carried all year long by one of seven goddesses (Htin Aung 1959: 28-30).

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: 16).

While this is no longer a court practice, travelling medicine men still hock these calendars in the country side. 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. Her mount was a tiger, foretelling a dry year.

The Songkran festival itself takes place over a three or four day period in Pang Daeng Nai. The first day (April 13th) is known as wan songkran long, the last day of the old year. 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 corresponding closest with the festival.
Table 4: Days of Songkran (Pang Daeng Nai)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>April 13th</th>
<th>April 14th</th>
<th>April 15th</th>
<th>April 16th</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bathing of the Buddha</td>
<td>Paying respect to elders</td>
<td>Sermon conducted at local temple</td>
<td>Song krau ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of sand chedi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paying respect to provincial governor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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, but as Pang Daeng Nai lacked any resident monks at the time, the Buddha images were bathed alone. On the first day of Songkran (April 13th), three of the smaller Buddha images contained within the village temple were brought to a bathing place outside the temple. The images include a statue of the Buddha standing in the “dispelling fear” position, a seated Buddha in the “calling the earth to witness” position, and a statue of Upakut, the famous forest monk. The images are typically carried by hand to a platform 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 three times around the temple to the accompaniment of drums (khreugen), gongs (go mo),

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28 There are two types of drums used in Pang Daeng Nai. A smaller drum (face at 27 cm 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.
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 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 never been built since arriving in Thailand, the village headman decided to construct one for the benefit of the younger generation. The structure is known as a *ho son u'm* and is pointed to as being particularly “Palaung” by the villagers (Plate 4). The surrounding Northern Thai villages do not construct like devices, though Rajadhon 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” (1986: 188).

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* (Plate 5). 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 down. 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 base. 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 and the base of the bamboo is made into a point. When water is poured in the top of the
*nong ka'bat u'm*, it travels through the spokes, down the bamboo rods, and when forced out the holes, it causes 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 term *ho son u'm* refers to the entire structure). 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 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*\(^{29}\)), but there is not enough time to carve such an elaborate *galay u'm*, so a boat shaped piece with a *ma-krai* drawn on it suffices. 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

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\(^{29}\) The naga is derived from India where its chief function is as a producer of rain (another reason people have suspected rain making as the origins for Songkran) (Vogel 1926: 209), reflecting the likely association of the rituals with rain making in the past. It commonly appears in the Theravada scripture, most notably when the naga king uses his hood to cover Buddha while he is meditating under the Bodhi tree.
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.

When the ho son u’m was first constructed for Songkran 2003, a monk’s robe was used as a filter. At first the villagers were not successful in making it spin. It takes a lot of water to make the nong kra’bat u’m spin; enough that water overflows over of the top. The robe prevented an adequate flow of water from entering the nong kra’bat u’m, so a cheese cloth was substituted. After this, the nong kra’bat u’m spun easily. Kham explained that “in the olden days, 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].”

According to Kham, the nong ka’bat u’m was designed back in Burma to allow the user 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. Kham recounts that in the olden days, the nong ka’bat u’m used to spin constantly. Today, people are too lazy, even though they have water in their homes. 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.

**Chedis 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 said it was a way to make merit.

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 lowland Thai groups 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: 1980). The sira saay also becomes important during khao pansa when the hair of the village novices will be shaved and placed on a banana leaf inside the small fence. At this time, the remaining dirt brought to make chedis will be 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 tawing, 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.
On the third day of Songkran (April 15th, 2003) a party of twenty Palaung men and women travelled to Chiang Mai to take part in the washing of the provincial governor’s hands. They took part in a procession alongside representatives from various ethnic groups and districts of Chiang Mai province. The parade passed through the streets of Chiang Mai to the residence of the governor, near the Ping River. There, men and women ceremoniously poured fragrant water over the hands of the governor. A similar event was 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 elders in the morning (Plate 6). 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 as they arrive at the houses of elders. They bring with them the offerings that they will present and bottles of fragrant somphoy 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 the 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. When the offerings are presented, the giver washes the hands of the elder with the somphoy water they have brought with them.

To receive their blessing the givers sit on the floor, 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 somphoy 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: 223; Tannenbaum 1995: 171-172; Terweil 1994: 42). Milne (1924) reported a similar conception 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: 336). As mentioned in Chapter Three, 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 (Song Krau)**

One of the most important communal rites held in Pang Daeng Nai is the annual song krau ceremony coinciding with Songkran. Song krau rites are popular among lowland Tai
groups and may be held any time throughout the year (Davis 1984; Tambiah 1970). *Song* is the Thai 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: 102).

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: 5-6; Kauffmann 1977: 196). 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 simply as a preventative measure. The larger, village wide *song krau* is held only once a year on the *wan sin yaay* corresponding with Songkran.

The large-scale, annual *song krau* ceremonies are popular among the Tai of northern Thailand and the Shan States of Burma (Davis 1984: 99-121; Durrenberger 1980: 55; Telford 1937: 168-169). While I have not heard of such a ceremony being held in
Central Thai villages, Scanlon (1985: 106) 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: 106).

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 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).

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 ready 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 it 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 be taken to the forest and laid against large trees as a means of sharing merit with the spirits of the trees (Plate 1).

Also constructed in the morning were four large bamboo and wood platforms, known as peun song (Plate 7). 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 Thai zodiac (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, naga, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, elephant) are placed on each of the platforms (see Appendix A for analysis of the role of the zodiac).

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 baby's "hair should not be shaved or cut on the day of the week on which the child was born" (Milne 1924: 31). Similar prohibitions are presented

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30 In 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. Rajadhon reports that in the Mon community of Paklat, the releasing of fish is accompanied by a large procession down to the river (Rajadhon 1975: 49).
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 1926: 31). 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 Kauffmann (1977: 196) and Rajadhon (1958: 6). Milne (1926: 35) reports similar offerings of rice and bamboo effigies to the temple when children are often ill.

A Northern Thai monk from Wat Den conducts the ceremony from 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 genitals 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 also brought up, along with a bundle of tied plants for stirring and distributing the water. The monk will stir the water while chanting in order to charge it with protective power. It will then be sprayed over the crowd at the end of the ceremony. Some of this water will also be poured out during the ceremony to share merit with other local spirits. One of the Buddha images (seated...
Buddha) is transferred from the temple yard to a raised table in the tower. Finally, 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 a house post to the tower. These threads, which crisscross the entire village, 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: 85) likens the thread to “an electric wire” which charges up objects it touches. While some writers are ambivalent about the meaning attached to these strings, the villagers understand the beneficial power to be merit. During the ceremony, threads dangling down from this net will be held by villagers or tied around their heads, or wrapped around bottles of somphoy water, which is used later to sprinkle over the house as a further means of dispelling misfortune and blessing the home (Plate 8). Several of the younger villagers took it upon themselves to connect a string to their motorcycle.31

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 said to scare away Mara, the Buddhist personification of evil.32 Throughout the morning, families place bottles of somphoy water and bags full of shirts and pants on the floor beneath the platform. These clothes will become charged with

31 This practice is understandable, as motorcycle crashes represent the most common form of accidental death, particularly around the Songkran festival. The Bangkok Post (April 17, 2003) reports that during the four day festival, 547 people were killed in drunk driving accidents.

32 Tambiah notes that “Mara is generally regarded as the personification of death; he is the Buddhist counterpart of the principle of destruction. In more philosophical terms he can be equated with the whole word of sensuous existence and the realm of rebirth, as opposed to liberation and nirvana: for such a world is under the sway of desire and death” (Tambiah 1970: 51). In Buddhist mythology, Mara sends temptresses and demons to try to distract the Buddha from attaining enlightenment.
protective power. The four guns which will be 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 ho teur. 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 four taa leo on each of the four posts. These prevent spirits from seeing inside the ho teur and will be brought later, 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 ajaan Tama. Davis (1984: 104) remarks that in the case of the Northern Thai, the song krau ceremony can be performed by anyone who can read the texts, though he concedes that in practice it is usually conducted by someone who has spent time as a monk. Similarly, Telford (1937: 167) observed a ceremony in Mung Yang, Kengtung State, Burma where the exorcism was performed by a medium on the first day, and the ritual blessing was performed by monks on the second day.

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33 This six pointed bamboo star is common across Southeast Asia. It is used by highlanders and lowlanders alike. The meaning differs slightly from place to place, but it generally revolves around spirits, illness, and protection. A drawing of one appears in Milne’s (1924) account of the Palaungs of Nahmsan, where it is described as follows: “The wise men make charms to keep the wearer safe in travelling, or from accidents, by scraping fibres from the bamboo poles of the bier on which a coffin has rested and interlacing them as in the accompanying figure” (1924: 266). Rajadhon writes that in Chiang Mai, “the taleow was used as a charm to prevent a dead person’s spirit from molesting the inmates of a house where death had occurred” (Rajadhon 1986: 146). Davis (1984: 163) describes the use of the taa laew by the Northern Thais to protect fields, as does Durrenberger (1980: 55) for the Shan.
While the Shan ceremonies described by Durrenberger (1980: 54) and Telford (1937: 168) both employ a central post (in the case of Telford, a tree known as the Sai Mung, or “heart of the village”) and monks, the Northern Thai ceremony described by Davis (1984) does not use either. An altar is constructed specifically for the ceremony. The Northern Thai altar is an elaborate cosmic representation, with a tray on the top 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: 106).

The Palaung also construct an altar that serves a similar purpose, though it plays a more peripheral role. Before the monk takes his place in the tower, the ajaan prepares an altar in front of the ho teur. 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. Despite the forty degree Celsius heat, most people (with the exception of children) remained seated attentive with their palms pressed together for the entire time. Some villagers hold umbrellas, others sit under a tarp erected near the ho teur for shade.

34 Traditionally, only a man who had spent time as a monk would have been taught to read.
Following the Pali chanting, 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 khaatha\textsuperscript{35} to drive the bad spirits away. The word khaatha\textsuperscript{a} is generally translated as a “magic spell.” Terweil (1994: 73) 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 khaatha\textsuperscript{a} is shorter than the scripture, and is spoken in Pali interspersed with Northern Thai.\textsuperscript{36}

During the recitation, the monk says such things 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 khaatha\textsuperscript{a}, 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 khaatha\textsuperscript{a} ordering the krau of each day of the week to leave the village.\textsuperscript{37} 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

\textsuperscript{35} The word khatta comes from the Pali or Sanskrit word gatha (Terweil 1994: 261).

\textsuperscript{36} While some would place the khaatha\textsuperscript{a} 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: 114). 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).

\textsuperscript{37} This 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: 102).
This is not the same as the four cardinal directions; rather they are carried to the four corners of the village. The platform is placed down, 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

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38 This 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: 55) notes that the tray is carried south, while Davis (1984: 117) notes that the tray is carried west.

39 According to the tipitaka, monks are not allowed to handle money. While it is nonetheless common to see monks engaged in simple commercial transactions in Thailand, there is still an attempt, particularly in the case of ritual, to uphold the appearance of the rule. In this case, the money is not handed to the monk directly, but placed on a tray for him to collect later.
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 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 some ill fortune is suspected by a villager.
CHAPTER FIVE:
ANALYSIS

The Songkran Festival of Pang Daeng Nai is not an autochthonous Palaung festival. It was adopted many years ago from their Tai and Burmese neighbours. Since then, Songkran has become an important calendrical festival in Palaung villages across southwestern China, Burma, and northern Thailand. Over the years, the festival has not remained the same for the Tai, Burmese, or Palaung. It has changed to reflect different cultures and the desires of new generations. Elders lament the change from a more sombre festival to the present day riotous water throwing and drinking, while the younger generations consider such activities to be the holiday’s appeal.

In some ways, the throwing of water and drinking to excess reflects Turner’s (1969: 177) state of *communitas*\(^\text{40}\) that accompanies *liminal* states. A *liminal* state is a transitional period, which in this case represents the passing from one year to the next. The primary perpetrators of the water throwing are young children who are permitted to throw water onto the adults without retribution. Young girls make up the bulk of the older kids “playing water.” Throughout the festival groups of young women can be seen dousing the young men of the village and throwing buckets of water onto the tourists who throughout the year they entertain with songs and dances. It is also one of the few times alcohol is consumed by women.

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\(^{40}\) Turner describes *communitas* as the “undifferentiated, homogeneous whole, in which individuals confront one another integrally, and not as ‘segmentalized’ into statuses and roles” (Turner 1969: 177).
While social rules of decorum are relaxed during the festival, Songkran does not represent a total reversal of status as in the Holi festival of India (see Turner 1969: 185-188). As Brohm wrote concerning the festival in Burma, “The rank ordering of society is clearly reflected in the degree of difference with which exchanges are made” (Brohm 1963: 160). As Terweil writes, “The aspect of jocularity should not obscure the fact that pouring water over a senior person is essentially an act of great respect. It is called rotnam phuyai, literally “pouring water over important people’, and is not solely reserved for the traditional new year” (1994: 298). In contrast to the buckets of water poured over family members and friends, persons of high status generally receive only a sprinkling of water or a small cup poured down their back.

The association with high status can also be seen in the act of pouring of water over the Buddha images, a central ritual connected with Songkran which brings the participants much merit. While the pouring of water over the Buddha image suggests Buddhist connections for the festival, other features are less likely to be considered “Buddhist,” even by the participants themselves. Acts such as asking forgiveness from elders and the ritual cleaning of the houses likely derive from Tai culture (or more ancient Palaung traditions). And yet countless other features of the festival, including the traditional taking of precepts, the sand chedis, the procession of Buddha images, the sermons, and the concluding song krau ceremony are all connected with Buddhism. It is for this reason that I stress the need to see Theravada Buddhism not as single “great tradition” interacting with several disparate “little traditions,” but as many “little traditions” interacting with other “little traditions” in a “greater” and “lesser” relationship. In this sense, we see the rituals associated with Songkran as Tai Buddhist practices
adopted by the Palaung. Buddhism thus becomes a vehicle not only for cosmological ideas, but for Tai cultural penetration as well.

It is not enough, then, to consider the Palaung form of Buddhism as a "Palaungification" of Buddhist doctrine. The fact that Palaung Buddhism strays from the "philosophical and doctrinal great tradition" has a lot to do with the fact that Buddhism had already passed through another culture (Tai or Burmese), and another culture before that (Sinhalese and Indian). It is more useful to compare Palaung religion to the practices of the Tai, as we have been doing here, or even the little traditions of other local or related ethnic groups (who may share other common features) than to some abstract "Great Tradition" of Theravada Buddhism.

**Practical Power of Buddhism**

When we examine both the Palaung and Tai forms of Buddhism, one of the notable features is the use of Buddhist symbols and institutions to bring about practical, this-worldly ends. Many scholars who favour the "Great Tradition" perspective of Theravada Buddhism have disregarded this practical power. Nevertheless, there are several references to immediate rewards following Buddhist rituals in the Tai literature, such as rain making rituals (Tambiah 1970: 178, 286-284, Terweil 1994 207), agricultural rites (Davis 1984: 156-164), and the acquisition of magic amulets and tattoos (Tannenbaum 1987, Terweil 1994: 59-79). Spiro likewise lists a number of magical practices associated with Burmese Buddhism, which he labels "Apotropaic" Buddhism, and notes such magical aspects have roots stretching back to the time of the Buddha (Spiro 1970: 160).

One of the principal sources of Buddhist practical power is merit (*bun*). When asked what merit is, the most common explanation given by Palaung in Pang Daeng Nai
is that it protects you from being in motorcycle accidents. Milne reports a similar interpretation for the Palaung in Burma, “Merit – acquired through countless lives –forms, as it were, a coat of mail round the body, which the darts of evil and mischievous spirits cannot pierce” (Milne 1924: 314).

This interpretation is not limited to the Palaung. As Terweil writes of the Central Thai, “protective magical power can be seen as the immediate aspect of merit” (Terweil 1995: 115). Tannenbaum writes that the Shan “expect that the merit they make to be beneficial in both this and future lives” (Tannenbaum 1996: 193). Durrenberger, describing the connection between merit and rocket firing in a Shan village, notes that “power need have no relation with the origin of the power. Power acquired by virtuous acts may be used to unvirtuous ends” (Durrenberger 1983: 72). And Tambiah writes that Thai villagers living in north-eastern Thailand “say that it [merit] has certain consequences in this life: the giving of gifts to monks produces a happy and virtuous state of mind” (Tambiah 1970: 53).

In the case of the Songkran festival, merit is made in a number of ways. It is produced by pouring water over the Buddha images, by making offerings to the images, and through attending sermons. The song krau ceremony is a particularly favoured occasion for making merit. During the ceremony, merit flows from the monk along the white threads connected to the heads of villagers, posts in houses, motorcycles, and various and sundry other items. The use of white threads is common in sermons throughout northern Thailand, but its use during communal song krau ceremonies is not well documented. 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: 168).

Merit transferred to houses this way is thought to bring about beneficial results for the family, such as health, wealth and happiness. While the concept of merit is commonly linked to the acts of an individual, the idea of merit as a substance that can be produced and transferred is popular in every Theravada Buddhist society (Gombrich 1971: 227-243; Spiro 1970: 124; Tambiah 1970). Merit is commonly shared with the spirits of dead relatives who may not be reborn yet or have become trapped in spirit form as a hungry ghost. It is also a common belief that the merit made by a monk during ordination flows primarily to his mother, who “gives” her son to the sangha.

Merit is not the only source of power associated with Buddhism. Blessings also act as a source of beneficial Buddhist power, though like the practical power of merit, the topic receives scant attention in the literature (Tannenbaum 1996: 182). Like merit,
blessings provide the recipient with health, happiness, and wealth. While the two concepts of merit and blessing are distinct, Tannenbaum notes that the "Shan do not systematically distinguish between 'merit' and 'blessing'" (Tannenbaum 1996: 191). The Palaung I spoke with did distinguish between the two, even though the practical results of both (in this lifetime, at least) were the same. Merit and blessings both act as types of power which produce beneficial results, but while merit is always associated with Buddhism, blessings may come from other sources. In the case of blessings given by elders during Songkran and other times of the year, the power is seen to come from the elders themselves, not an abstract god or spirit working through them.

While Palaung can and do distinguish between Buddhist and non-Buddhist rites in the case of blessings, spirits, and merit making, there nonetheless exists a degree of ambiguity and overlap between various types of power. Whatever the source, power is commonly harnessed to accomplish similar tasks. This interchangeable character of various types of power is clear when we compare the Palaung ceremony with those described for other ethnic groups. Healing ceremonies using similar platforms to carry away spirits are commonly conducted in Northern Thai and Lawa villages by spirit doctors with no referent to Buddhism (Anuman Rajadhon 1958: 5-6; Kauffmann 1977:

With regards to wealth, Terweil tells of a famous monk who blessed the crowd with the words: "May all of you win the lottery this week" (Terweil 1995: 16).

Milne notes the same for the Palaung in Burma:

A man or a woman who reaches a great age is a person who in past existences has led a good life, whose presence brings good fortune to a house. Children are therefore taught to kneel before an old man or woman, taking some little offering, a bamboo joint full of water, a few sticks for the fire, or the tender leaves of some wild plant to be cooked as a vegetable" The child makes these offerings and receives the blessing: "Now let prosperity come to this child! Give him (or her) calmness and a quiet heart! When he enters the thick jungle, passing through it to the valley, may no dangers come near him! May he eat well and drink water that is sweet! May he shine pure as the stars and the rays of the sun!' As may be seen from the blessing above, no god or spirit is invoked, it is simply the blessing,
The song krau ceremony described by Davis (1984: 99-121) 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 results. For the Shan of Kengtung, Telford (1937: 167) describes a division of the ceremony into two parts: the exorcism being performed by a medium on the first day and the blessing (complete with white threads) is given by a monk on the second day. It is unclear whether the Palaung have collapsed the previous ceremony into one or whether the Shan of Kengtun have separated the one day event into two parts. Whatever the case may be, given the variety of forms this rite takes among Shan and Northern Thai groups, it is likely that such variations have existed for quite some time.

However the ceremony developed, the present day ritual in Pang Daeng Nai derives its power from Buddhism. This inclusion is not surprising. Like the Tai, the Palaung consider the power of Buddhism to be superior to that of spirits. Terweil suggests that this ritual superiority originates from a time when Buddhism was primarily a court religion. As Buddhism spread to the countryside, its connections to royalty translated into ritual superiority over local spirits (Terweil 1994: 12). While it is impossible to say whether Buddhism was originally thought more powerful than local spirits by the peasantry, it is safe to say that today it is considered more powerful than spirits and other dangerous forces (Kirsch 1977: 260). Several authors proposing a systematic division between Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions have argued that this superiority leads to a ritual separation of Buddhism from spirit matters (Ames 1964: 36). While this superiority is recognised, it translates into practice not as a total ritual

the good wishes of the old person. It would be different if the child were going on a pilgrimage to Burma, then the help of the spirits would be invoked (Milne 1924: 49).
separation between two traditions, but a situation where Buddhist institutions are employed to make rituals more efficacious.

**Communal Buddhism**

The idea that Buddhism serves practical ends throws into question common assumptions regarding Buddhism as an “otherworldly” religion oriented towards an individual’s quest for *nibbana* (Kirsch 1977: 260; Tambiah 1970: 40). Perhaps the most explicit statement of this position is given by Phillips, who writes, “the principal tenet of Hinayana [Theravada] Buddhism is the complete psychological freedom, isolation, and responsibility of every person” and that this principal imparts “a fundamental legitimacy to the pursuit of individualistic self-concern” (Phillips 1965: 89). Even when the dimension of merit and rebirth are taken into account (a “this-worldly” goal, compared to *nibbanic* salvation), the individualistic focus remains, though the emphasis shifts from *nibbana* to hierarchy and social mobility (Durrenberger 1996: 129; Hanks 1962; Ingersoll 1975; Lehman 1996: 29; Mulder 1975; Gombrich 1975).

This individualistic focus of *nibbana* and the vertical ordering of society via merit have led to a general neglect of the more group-oriented benefits of Buddhist rites. This is unfortunate, as O’Connor writes, “In certain cases, merit making (*boun*) not only strengthens communal solidarity, but it counters a more ancient invidious competition (*piep*) that favours rank” (O’Connor 1996: 228). While it is unclear whether or not Songkran counters rank, the festival as a whole, and the *song krau* ritual in particular, strengthens communal solidarity within Pang Daeng Nai.

In the case of the *song krau* ritual, villagers benefit from the ritual by being members of a community, rather than by gaining insight into the ultimate reality or by
accumulating stores of merit (*bun*) for a better future rebirth (although both of these may also take place). This goal might be seen as antithetical to Buddhist doctrine, which advocates the separation of the individual from the social world. It nonetheless fits quite well with the commonly cited social nature of Buddhist rituals, and suggests that the group orientation of such rituals may derive in part from the perceived benefits for the group as a whole, rather than individual displays of status and opportunities to make merit.

When thinking about how the community is reconstituted during the *song krau* ritual, it is useful to draw upon Douglas’ writings on pollution and boundary maintenance (Douglas 1966). The use of food in the *song krau* ceremony is significant in this respect. Food is the common way of calling spirits to help. In this case, the food is polluted, and unlike other cases where the villagers feast on the food after the ritual is conducted, this food is sent out of the village. As Douglas (1966: 121) points out, matter issuing from the body is a common symbol for pollution. One sees this in the anti-power of menstruation, the hair clippings sent out of the village during the ceremony, and the practice of spitting on the *peun song* platforms before chasing away the spirits. Like the body, the *krau* infested food issuing from the village itself is polluted and cannot be re-consumed either by the villagers (it is not eaten) or by the village itself (the *peun song* are left outside the village).

As noted by Milne (1924: 201), spirits of illness and misfortune prefer to travel along paths to the village. These pathways are the spots where the village is most vulnerable to alien intrusion. Spirits of misfortune can be carried to the village by
outsiders (such as in the case of *bre*43), follow an unsuspecting villager back from the forest or graveyard, or arrive unaccompanied. In the past, the path into a Palaung village was marked by a gate “made of three pieces of bamboo or wood, two uprights joined together at the top with a cross-piece, on which is painted an incantation, or a few sentences from the Buddhist scriptures” (Milne 1924: 201). While Pang Daeng Nai no longer has such a gate, one can still be seen in Nor Lae near the temple grounds.

The spirits preference for travelling along paths is one reason why the four *peun song* platforms are not deposited along the but at the four corners of the village. Even this is not seen as enough, so guns are fired to chase them away and *taa leo* are set up so that spirits can no longer see the village. One sees a similar concern with the spirit finding its way back into the village after funerals. The cremation ground is located away from the path so that the spirit cannot wander back to his or her home. To prevent the dead spirit from following anyone back to the village, men sprinkle *somphoy* water on the villagers as they return along the path from the cremation grounds.

The *song krau* ritual reaffirms the boundaries of the village body (the abode of human beings and helpful spirits), setting it apart from the non-village (the abode of ambiguous spirits and animals). Several authors have noted this distinction between nature/culture and spirits/Buddhism in the context of Southeast Asian religions, particularly the equation of nature with spirits (Davis 1984: 85; Rhum 1994). Perhaps the

43 Milne describes *bre* as a man or woman “who has the power of projecting his or her spirit into another person’s body” (Milne 1924: 260). This projection is not a possession but an attack on the person’s health. While Milne (1924: 261-263) describes *bre* as malicious beings conscious of their power, the Palaungs of Pang Daeng Nai believe that a *bre* often does not know that he or she hosts such a spirit. Villagers profess that Pang Daeng Nai does not have any *bre*, but that nearby villages may contain such men and women. During large festivals when several other villages come to Pang Daeng Nai, a comic performance is enacted to frighten any *bre* away which may have come from other villages. During the procession from the road to the temple, which is done to welcome the arriving village, two men dress up in makeshift costumes, one as a farmer with a cross bow and the other as an old women with a broom. Unfortunately, no one could remember the names or stories associated with these two characters.
most relevant here is Tambiah (1969), who notes that in north-eastern Thailand a wild animal entering the house is a common reason to hold a *song krau* ceremony. Milne likewise mentions several inauspicious signs associated with wild animals coming into the house for the Palaung in Burma (Milne 1924: 273).44

While the distinction between nature and culture, and the subsequent links between spirits and Buddhism, are useful, the connection requires some qualification. Many spirit rituals, such as those performed for the *tsao muang* and the *kaña raw*, are oriented inward towards the village. Likewise, villagers construct a spirit house for the spirit of the homestead (*jaw thi*) and propitiate this spirit regularly so that it will watch over their family. In this sense, spirits cannot be identified clearly with “nature.”

Buddhism is somewhat easier to equate with culture, as it is an important marker of “civilisation” for lowland peoples (Davis 1984: 84). For the Palaung, it provides an important bond between themselves and their neighbours, though I am unaware whether or not they consider Buddhism as a measure of “civilisation.”

It is more useful to consider the dichotomy of *nature/culture* as presented by Goody, which is the presence or absence of human influence (Goody 1977: 214). In the case of the *song krau* ritual, the *krau* that is being expelled is that which is destructive to humans. The proper realm of these spirits is nature, or the realm of non-humans. Through the carrying of the *peun song* out of the village, the boundaries of in-group/out-group, human/non-human, and culture/nature are reconstituted. Spirits associated with

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44 In Pang Daeng Nai, animals themselves are sometimes associated with spirits of misfortune. One example of this I observed was the practice of killing of roosters who crow at night after all the other roosters have gone to sleep. These roosters are said to be inhabited by evil spirits that may cause the illness or death of a villager. To avert this tragedy, the head of the rooster is cut off, its mouth wedged open with a small stick, and its head is placed on a bamboo stake at a fork in the road. This is done so that the spirit of the rooster will go straight into the woods, and not wander back up the path back into the village to cause more problems.
misfortune and illness, identified with the "non-human" (for the detrimental effects on human life) are expelled, while the human realm is reconstituted through the merit which flows from the chanting monk to the households, the water sprinkled on the crowd, and the blessing which concludes the sermon.

**Summary**

While many themes can be deduced from the Songkran festival, I have focussed on the practical uses of Buddhism in communal settings to counter claims that Buddhism is primarily a religion of world-renouncing ascetics or an individualistic pursuit of merit for personal gain. While Buddhism does encompass both these ideals, it also provides people with a practical source of power for achieving this-worldly ends, such as fertility, protection, and even wealth. These goals may be pursued individually as well, but are also pursued for the good of the group.

Buddhism is a complex, evolving symbolic system, with multiple meanings ascribed by numerous individuals and cultures across a wide expanse of time and space. The task of anthropology is to contextualise and understand these multiple interpretations rather than pass judgement on their orthodoxy or else, as Tannenbaum has noted, anthropologists are placed in "the uncomfortable position of trying to explain why 'Buddhists' do not understand Buddhism" (Tannenbaum 1996: 207, 209).
CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSION

In the introduction, I discussed the issue "great tradition" versus "little tradition" in peasant studies. I argued that there is no "Great Buddhist" tradition, only "little traditions" (Tai or Burmese, for example) whose positions as the provider of beliefs place their own tradition in a "greater" position to the local, receiving culture. They may be a dominant political force in the region, or the transmission may be the result of other forces, such as trade routes and missionaries. This "greater tradition" does not remain unchanged as it enters new cultural settings; it is transformed by the local culture to form a new "little tradition," which in this case results in Palaung Buddhism.

Given the scarcity of material on Palaung and Tai peoples in Burma, it is difficult to say how this process of cross-cultural borrowing took place. Several factors, however, suggest that this process will continue in Thailand. The continued patronage of Wat Den will likely produce an increasingly Northern Thai flavour to Palaung rituals and ceremonies. The next generation of Palaung Buddhist lay specialists will likely come from the crop of present day Palaung novices ordained at Wat Den. Scriptures used in village ceremonies are all written in Northern Thai, which is also the language used at Wat Den. In the end, other factors, such as mass-media, cross-cultural intermarriage, educational opportunities, and the ability to travel freely will likely have more of an effect on Palaung identity than Buddhism. But as Buddhism remains a powerful symbol for
Thai national identity, it will likely help the Palaung establish positive relations with lowlanders who consider it a mark of civilisation.

**Highland-Lowland Religion**

While this thesis focuses primarily on the relationship of Theravada Buddhism and local traditions, the underlying relationship between highland and lowland religious traditions is also implicit throughout. Unlike some authors, I am not convinced a common, underlying system exists to explain the myriad of disparate traditions in mainland Southeast Asia (Kirsch 1973: 7; Durrenberger 1989: 43). Nevertheless, given the special situation of Palaung religion, I believe a few words regarding highland and lowland traditions are necessary.

Highland and lowland religious traditions are often treated as self-contained, unrelated entities. Given the status of Leach's (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, a work that stresses the structural interrelation between highland and lowland societies, the lack of such studies is somewhat surprising. Right now, there are very few Buddhist highland cultures living in Thailand. Nevertheless, other examples of Buddhafication (and Taification) exist. The Lawa, a Mon-Khmer predecessor of the Thai in the region, have long adopted Buddhism and many have become Taified to the point where they are indistinguishable from surrounding Northern Thai.

The Lahu Nyi have also integrated several Buddhist practices into their religion, many of which are related to the subject matter discussed here for the Palaung. On the full moon preceding Songkran, the Lahu Nyi perform a ceremony known as the *Sheh-Kaw*

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45 Kirsch argues that “hill tribe society is oriented to maximising ‘potency,’ ‘fertility,’ or some such quality” (Kirsch 1973: 7).
Shi-nyi. Like the Palaung festival, the festival takes place on the full moon preceding Songkran (Walker 1981: 139). “Sheh-kaw” comes from the Northern Thai/Shan word “sheh” meaning “sand” and “kaw” meaning “to making into a heap,” in reference to the sand chedis. “Shi-nyi” means “day of blessing and merit” in Lahu, and refers to the wan sin yaay days as observed in the lowlands (Walker 1981: 139). Like its name suggests, the She-kaw Shi-nyi involves the construction of sand chedis. Walker notes, “the sand particles and puffed rice which they [the Lahu Nyi] place at the base of the new temple posts and flags represent the many sins which they hope will be removed from them” (Walker 1981: 141). The Lahu Nyi festival also contains a similar hand-washing ritual (i-ka li yu-da-ve), though this is performed by women only (Walker 1981: 139).

One final note should be made regarding the difference between urban and rural Buddhism. So far all the examples, both highland (Lahu, Lawa, and Palaung) and lowland (Shan, Thai, and Northern Thai), have been rural in character. Terwiel (1994) uses this urban-rural dichotomy to explain two types of Buddhism existing within Thailand. He argues that Buddhism in rural areas is primarily “magico-animism,” while urbanites tend to hold a more sophisticated view regarding the teachings of the Buddha. In response to this, I would like to point out that the use of practical merit towards communal ends is not restricted to rural northern Thailand. In 1968, the city of Chiang Mai revived a merit making ceremony to express gratitude to the guardian spirits of the city. The ceremony, known as Thambunsuepchata (“thambun” meaning “make merit”), involved the citizens presenting offerings to chanting monks who were positioned on the four corners of the city walls. In this case, offerings are made individually, but like the Palaung song krau ceremony, the people benefited by virtue of being members of the city (Ingersoll 1975: 238-239).
There is still a lot of work to be done on Palaung religion, particularly in regards to folklore, non-Buddhist rituals, and spirit healing. The traditions in Pang Daeng Nai, although stronger than other villages in Thailand, are rapidly changing, and some are disappearing altogether. On the subject of religious knowledge, Kham remarks: “I am the headman. Myself, the ajaan [lay Buddhist specialist], and the da bu muang [spirit specialist] have to do all the ceremonies. We have to know everything, but we don’t. I don’t have a book, so I forget a lot.”

While there are no books describing how to perform rites in Pang Daeng Nai, the Palaung do use a system of writing based on the Shan alphabet. This is a fortunate case, and it is likely that the written material kept by the villages, both in Thailand and Burma, will someday prove to be a valuable source of information. This is particularly true for Burma, where anthropologists have not been able to conduct ethnographic research for many years, and in the case of the Silver Palaung, has yet to begin. I hope that this situation will soon change, but for now, the Palaung living in Thailand should be of concern to anthropologists, both for their interesting cultural traditions and the pleasure of working with these communities.
APPENDIX A:
ASTROLOGY AND THE SONG KRAU CEREMONY

While Davis (1985: 102) makes explicit connections between the song krau ceremony and astrology, no use of zodiac effigies during exorcising or healing rituals are found in the literature. There is, however, mention of numerous animal effigies for individual satuang ceremonies. Kauffmann, writing about satuang rites he observed in various Lawa villages of northern Thailand, reports the presence of “clay figurines representing the sick man,” “pigs,” “horses,” “elephants,” “buffalo,” “chickens,” “ox,” “snake,” and “tiger” (Kauffmann 1977: 196, 198). Rajadhon, writing about a satuang ceremony in Phrae province, Thailand, reports the use of a “clay doll and clay figurines of such domestic animals as an elephant, a horse, a buffalo, a cow, a pig, and a dog” (Rajadhon 1958: 6).

No explanation is given for these animals, although Kauffmann suggests that they may be of a “sacrificial” nature (Kauffmann 1977: 196). A close examination reveals that all the animals mentioned are found in either the Northern Thai or Central Thai Zodiac, and no animals not of the zodiac are present. That there exist connections between the zodiac and healing rituals is not surprising, when one considers the close connection between astrology and personal misfortune (see Davis 1976).

Besides the twelve animals of the zodiac, another connection can be made between the song krau ritual and the song tua poeng tua chon rite conducted in Northern

46 And by extension, the Chinese zodiacs from which they are derived. The zodiac animals for the Chinese and Central Thai include a rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, naga, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. The difference between the Central and Northern Thai zodiacs is the substitution of an elephant in the north for the pig.
Thai villages. The *song tua poeng tua chon* ("sending away colliding Tutelary animals") ceremony is performed as a curing rite and is not associated with Songkran (Davis 1984: 172-173). Within the “*tua poeng*” or “Tutelary animal” system of astrology, a person’s fortune is bound up with a particular Tutelary animal, determined by consulting an astrological table. The table is circular, so that lines can be drawn to connect opposing animals. The table given by Davis (1994: 172) includes the following animals: rat, elephant, ox, garuda, naga, tiger, griffin, and cat (the Laotian charts are similar, except the griffin is represented by a lion).

**Figure 3: Chart used to determine *tua poeng* (Tutelary animal)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rat</th>
<th>elephant</th>
<th>ox</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naga</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiger</td>
<td>griffin (or lion)</td>
<td>cat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine one’s tutelary animal, men start at the tiger and count their age clockwise, while women start at the ox and count their age counter-clockwise. If the animal opposite to a person’s Tutelary animal, known as *tua chon*, or “colliding animal,” is more powerful than the Tutelary animal it is an inauspicious sign. For example, if a man lands on the rat, the opposite animal on the chart is the cat, foretelling misfortune for the year. The reverse is true if he lands on the tiger, which is located opposite to the ox.

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47 Garuda are bird-like creature which legend has it despises the serpent-like naga and is eternally attacking them.
The terms "peun song" used by the Palaung to describe the bamboo platform\(^{48}\) and the term "song tua poeung" likely refers to the same thing.\(^{49}\) While there are no representations of the tua poeung animals in Pang Daeng Nai, a further connection may exist between the paper zodiac cut outs and the tua poeung found in Laos. The paper cut outs in Pang Daeng Nai are made from the zodiac stamps used to make the images on the paper flags that adorn the sira saay grounds. The stamps are purchased in Chiang Dao and are likewise used by Northern Thais for constructing flags to be placed in their sand chedis. It is interesting that the same paper Songkran flags in Laos do not depict the Thai zodiac, but the nine Tutelary animals found in the chart above (Tharatat 2002: 5). This practice can be seen in Luang Prabang where there continues a practice of placing the paper flags in sand chedis along the bank of the Mekong river.

Tharatat (2002) argues that the tua peung should likewise be seen as Laotian adaptations of the various celestial mounts from Brahman astrology. In Indian astrology, each day of the week corresponds with one of the celestial bodies. Each body likewise corresponds with a god, who rides a particular animal as a mount. Tharatat (2002: 8) notes a correspondence between the tao phaung (tua peung) in Laos and the Mounts of the Brahman gods. The tao phaung (six animals) and the Brahman mounts (nine animals) have six animals in common. If this correspondence is true, than the tua paung correspond back to the “nine celestial destroyers” (nine celestial bodies) described by Davis (1984: 106). The connection, however, is not solid, as many of the repeating

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\(^{48}\) Which the Northern Thai call a “khae” (Davis 1984: 106) and the Lawa refer to as a satuang (Kauffmann 1977: 1985).

\(^{49}\) “Song” means to send, and can be placed either before or after the word poeung. “Poeung” refers to the Tutelary animal in Davis (1984), and “tua” is a classifier for the poeung” which simply means it is an animal. See also Tharatat (2002: 8), who notes the presence of the tao phaung in Laos, which correspond with the tua poeung animals found in Davis (1984: 106).
animals, such as the naga and garuda, are common symbols in any system using animals. One could also point to the seven mounts of the seven Songkran sisters who share five mounts with the Brahman gods. As the sisters likewise are associated with the days of the week, there may be some basis for connection here. More research on the comparative aspects of such myths is needed.

It is possible that in the past the tua peung played a more dominant role in the Songkran ceremony and song krau ceremonies in the past. When combined with the idea of sending away the nine celestial deities (“Nine Destroyers” as Davis (1984: 103) calls them), which are associated with the days of the week, the ceremony effectively covers both daily and yearly misfortune. Misfortune can also be connected to a person’s zodiac symbol, so it is not surprising that, given the popularity of the Thai Zodiac, the Tutelary animals have been replaced. Nonetheless, as the presence of tua peung flags are still seen in Laos, and the use of the term song peung to describe the rafts suggest the use of the twelve zodiac animals may be a more recent innovation.
Appendix B:

Colour Plates
Plate 1. Central village post (*ho teur*)

Plate 2. Shrine of Lord of Land (*Tsao Muang*)
Plate 3. Shrine of Water Spirit (*karnam u'm*)

Plate 4. *Ho son u'm*
Plate 5. Water wheel (nong ka 'bat u 'm)

Plate 6. Family blessing given by Kham and his wife
Plate 7. *Song peun* Platforms

Plate 8. Children with white thread tied to heads
April 8, 2004

Mr. Sean Ashley
Graduate Student
Department of Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dear Mr. Ashley:

Re: Exorcising with Buddha: Palaung Buddhism in Northern Thailand

The above-titled ethics application has been granted approval by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board, in accordance with Policy R 20.01, "Ethics Review of Research Involving Human Subjects".

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

* For inclusion in thesis/dissertation/extended essays/research project report, as submitted to the university library in fulfillment of final requirements for graduation. Note: correct page number required.
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