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Monks and the Ancient Monasteries in Bagan: Social and Religious Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of monks and the social and religious activities related to the ancient monasteries in Bagan today. This paper summarises research undertaken at Bagan between 2008-2014, at six active monasteries: Taung-bi Nat-taung monastery, Nat-taung monastery, Minnanthu Lei-myet- hna Monastery, Shin Araham Oakkyaung Monastery, Tamani Monastery and Eithipyinnyadewaguru monastery. Other activities of monks and laypeople include social activities when monks are invited to houses to celebrate these events, the daily food offering at dawn to all the monks who live in old Bagan area in the Eithipyinnyadewaguru monastery near Sarapa Gate under the supervision of Tant Kyi Taung Yan Aung Chan Tha Sayadaw and Ashin Pyinya Zawta, Eithipyinnyadewaguru, Bamboo monastery. For lunch, the chief monk of Taung-bi monastery arranges the cars for the monks who live in Old Bagan to go to the New Bagan. In addition, at Taung-bi Nat taung monastery, there opens free of charge clinic for local people in Bagan and other neighbouring cities.

Key words: social and religious activities, Monks' involvement, daily food offering, free of charge clinic.



Fig 1. The chief monk announces the donation lists

Introduction

The chronology of Bagan is 1262 years from A.D 107 to A.D 1369 with 55 kings and the construction of temples, pagodas, alms houses, the rest houses, libraries and reservoirs. For the support of the Sangha or monkhood and the Buddhist monastic education system, many monasteries were constructed. Many of these monasteries continue to serve an important religious, social and educational role today as described below.

Social activities related to the ancient monasteries

The social significance of monks in daily life is illustrated by the many vital ceremonies involving monks that occur outside the monastery. For example, if Bagan villagers celebrate the following occasions they will invite monks to their house: funeral or marriage ceremonies, a new born baby or celebration of 100-days after birth, a naming ceremony for the new-born, a child's annual birthday, their own or grandparents birthdays, the newly wedded couple's donation for the monks, moving to a new house (Waing Thant Pwe) (ဝိုင်းသန့်ပွဲ).

Most of these activities celebrate according to the set ways. Firstly, the donors request the monks to visit their house and donate robes, rice, candles, the scented sticks, bananas, coconuts, medicines, money and other necessities. In return, the monks accept food offerings and recite the Parrittas, preach the suitable Buddha's life stories from the Jatakas, the Sutta Pitaka and meditation. Mostly, the donors take the five precepts or eight precepts from the monks and share their merit with water libation. Previously people request the monks for casting their new born baby's horoscope, record of one's birth date and time with relative positions of the planets at the time of one's birth usually written on palm leaf. This traditional custom can be seen in the ancient monasteries in Bagan even nowadays.

For a funeral, the donor should invite an even numbers of the monks, 2 or 4 or 6 or 8 or 10 or 12 or 14 or 16 and offer pork meat, 2 or 4 or 6 slices, three times. The first time is as soon as the person dies, the second time is two days after death and the third time is seven days after death. The chief monk makes the water libation first for the deceased person and shares the merits. Then, the invited monks recite the Parrittas. After that, the donor offers the monk with robes, money, food and other necessary things. An exceptional case is that the donor invites the number of the monks equal to the age of the deceased person.

In weddings or other auspicious activities, the donor has to invite an odd number, so 3 or 5 or 7 or 9 or 11 or 13 or 15 or 17 and offer the monks pork meat, 5 or 7 slices. The monk recites the Parrittas first and after that makes the water libation for the donor. Mostly the donors invite the monks whom they rely on or live in their neighbouring area. In the Bagan area where research for this paper was undertaken, these social activities are celebrated in active monasteries at least ten times per year.



Fig. 2. Offering rice and curry to the novices



Fig 3. Offering money to the novice

Religious activities related to ancient monasteries

There is a religious activity that the daily food offering at dawn to all the monks who live in old Bagan area in the Eithipyinyadewaguru monastery, near Sarapa Gate, Old Bagan. This activity is under the supervision of Tant Kyi Taung Yan Aung Chan Tha Sayadaw and A Shin Pyinya Zawta (Eithipyinyadewaguru, Bamboo monastery). The procedures for offering the daily food are as follows:

- (1) Firstly, the cooking team cooks rice and curries at 3:00 a.m.

- (2) After cooking the food, under the leadership of the monks and nuns, the food is displayed on the tables and all the donors stand in queue for waiting the monks.
- (3) At 5:00 a.m., there beats the wooden pole three times and the chief monk (Sayadaw) announces the lists of the donors and calls “Sadu (Well done)” three times. After that the monks and novices also stand in queue systematically and go around in procession.
- (4) The donation items include rice, three main curries with vegetables, snacks, fruits, biscuits, tooth paste, robe, soap and soap powders, blades, nail clippers, money and Myanmar traditional medicines. (Fig.1,2.)
- (5) Most of the donors come from the whole country; Yangon, Mandalay, Naypyi daw, Pindaya, Monywa, Bagan and even abroad. The daily food offering for the whole life (Hsun; Padethapin) (ဆွမ်းပဒေသာပင်) can cost 30000 kyats.

For the more venerable, the donors give the same robe colour (dark brown colour), the same bowl, and the same food boxes. They donate at least two robes for each one every year. In 2011, donors for the robes were from Singapore.



Fig 4. Interview with the chief monk Tant kyi Taung Yan Aung Chan Tha Sayadaw

For this donation activity, Tant kyi Taung Yan Aung Chan Tha Sayadaw said:

“Because of King Anawratha’s gratitude, the monks can have the chance to get the food and maintain the Buddhist Sasana for long time. About 2000 years ago, most of the leaders in the world killed their rivals at that time. But King Anawratha did not kill the Mon King; Manuha for carrying the three Pitakas from Thaton to Bagan and paid respect for him and his followers. So, we can say that the mutual understanding for each other between the human beings started from Myanmar country in the world.”

In this monastery, all Buddhist people, local and foreigner, can stay and meditate. The meditation centre opens every year. The chief monk and his assistant teach the way of meditation and preach the Buddhist texts for the lay people. Nat Taung monastery (Mya taung taik) and Taung-bi Nat taung monastery are near this monastery and the monks and novices come to the donation at dawn. But for lunch, the chief monk of Taung-bi monastery arranges the cars for the monks who live in Old Bagan to go to the New Bagan. Because of the maintenance of ancient monuments, most of the villages in the Old Bagan moved to the New Bagan area and the local Buddhist people wanted to offer the food for their monks daily. (See in Fig.6). About moving their residences to the New Bagan area, one of the key informants said:

“At first, we were not convenient with the new surroundings. The electricity could not get, water was scare and transportation was not good. But nowadays, the transportation and electricity become good and other needs are convenient.”

About going to the New Bagan area for daily food offering, one of the key informants; the chief monk of the Taung-bi Nat taung monastery said:

“Most of the monks who live in the Old Bagan area did not get enough food because of their donors moved to the New Bagan area. So he arranged for cars to go to the New Bagan area daily, with the oil for the cars expense at least 200000 kyats per month and the cost borne by him. Therefore, now he puts the donation box in front of the monastery and this covers the expense. Moreover, some of his main donors support this problem. Nowadays, the visitors from other cities and abroad visit to the monastery and donate some money for the maintenance of this monastery.”



Fig 5. Offering food to the monk and other lay people who practise meditation



Fig 6. Donated car to go around to the New Bagan area for daily food offering in 2011

In the selected active monasteries, some native people buy the new house or vehicles and open the new business offices. When they buy the new house or vehicles, they invite one or more monks to a meal at their house and offer food and various articles to the monks. The monks recite the Sutta and acclaim them to get the good benefit. After the preaching of the monks, the donors sprays the Sutta water for the new house or the new vehicles with the leaves of the Eugenia tree for it to escape from any danger and evil spirits.

Similarly, when donors open their new business offices, they request the monks to their new offices and accept the food offerings and other necessary items. The monks recite the Parittas and Suttas for the donors and pray for them to improve their new business. People make the water to be endowed with powers through recitation of Sutta and spray around the corners of their offices for escaping the danger and any evil or sinful deed. If the donor invites the monks in the morning, they offer the rice and curry to the monks and if they invite the monks in the evening they only offer the monks with cold drink. Most of the openings of the new business are new shop or new hotel openings.

Opening free of charge clinic

In 2013, Dr. U Hla Tun, doctor of Ayeyarwaddy River Pleasure Boat opened a free of charge clinic for local people in Bagan and other neighbouring cities at the Taung-bi Nat taung monastery. Firstly, he made and put a donation box on his boat and saved some money to open clinic at the compound of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery in Bagan. People who took his boat mostly are tourists and local people in Myanmar who donated money to the needy persons for their health and well-being.

Local people in Bagan who cannot afford to the hospital fees started to come to his clinic, about 100-200 every Friday, Saturday and Sunday about 9:00 am until after midnight 12:00 pm. The numbers gradually increased and nowadays 2000 patients to come regularly not only Bagan areas but also from Mandalay, Hpa-an, Tarchilat, Kyaing-ton, Myaik and Dawei. Dr. U Hla Tun is an Ortho Specialist so he cures most patients who are suffering about their back and knees. Some patients who need to attend hospital because of a major disease are assisted to sent to the government hospital.

Previously, all of the expenses were free of charge but nowadays patients need to pay half as one patient can get one month's medicine, a large expense. It is like the government hospital about " Sayeik hmya pay " (စရိတ်မျှပေး). Half pay the expense with the patient and hospital system but the main fund is based on the donation box of Dr. U Hla Tun's Ayeyarwaddy River Pleasure Boat.

The medical workers who help Dr. Hla Tun are now about 20 persons including 4 young doctors, nurses and physio- therapy helpers. They all are volunteers and receive no salary but the chief monk U Thanwara gives them to a place they can stay and sometimes gives pocket money to the girl volunteers who are from Mandalay, Loikaw, Myit-kyi-na and Bamaw. Previously, volunteers came from Yangon to helped and participate the activities concerned with the clinic. Nowadays, they do not come regularly because a similar clinic opened in Yangon.

Patients from other cities come to the clinic on Wednesday and wait until Friday. They need to take tokens and according to tokens doctors treat and cure their disease. The patients are many so that Dr. Hla Tun looks them after midnight and goes back to his job on Sunday morning at 10:00 am. Even though very tired he loves his job and do the best for his patients.

The chief monk of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery Sayadaw U Thanwara also supports a lot to the patients. He and his junior monks entertain the visitors (patients) with lunch and dinner on Wednesday and Thursday. For Friday, Saturday and Sunday, the chief monk donate breakfast to them. He arranges the place they stay. He also needs to maintain his monastery so that he put donation box in front of his monastery and visitors from local and foreign donate money. Nowadays, some foreigners (tourists) also participate to the donation to the patients and other participants. They also want to learn the clinic activities and monks' support them.



Fig.7. Taung-bi Nat taung monastery, Bagan

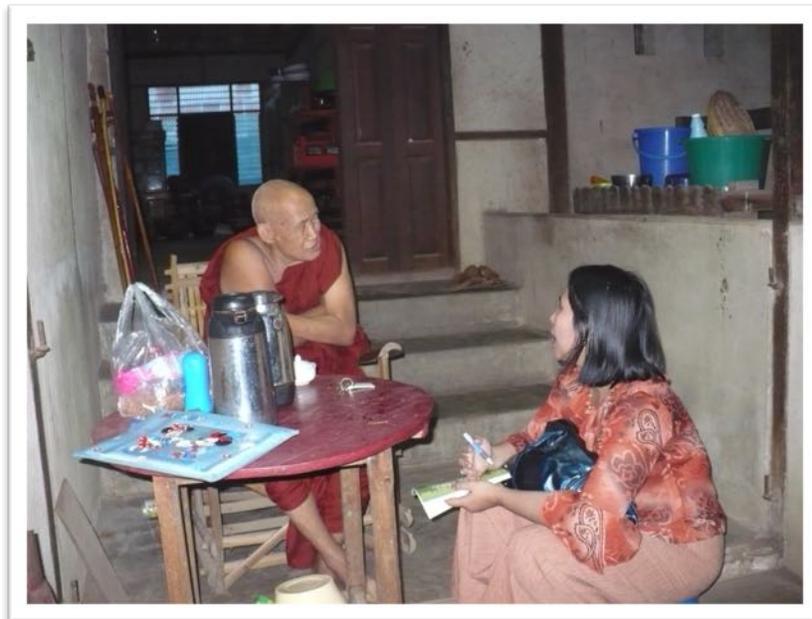


Fig.8. Key Informant Interview with the Chief Monk of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery, Bagan

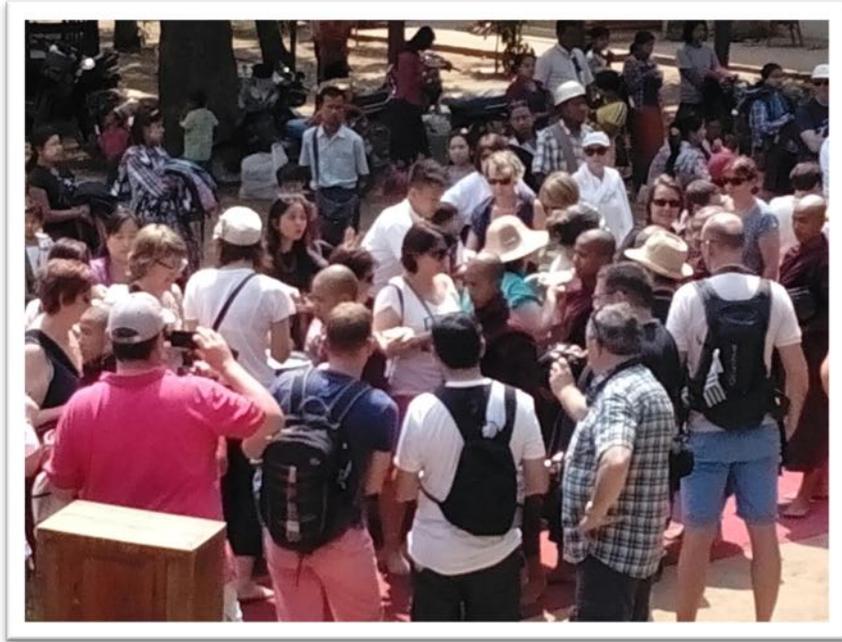


Fig.9. Donation of food to the monks in Taung-bi Nat taung monastery by tourists from various countries and local people



Fig.10. The monks donate food to the local patients from remote cities who are waiting for the medical treatment



Fig.11. The local patients from remote cities who are waiting for the medical treatment



Fig.12. The local patients from remote cities eating their lunch in the compound of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery



Fig.13. The local patients from remote cities eating their lunch in the compound of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery



Fig.14. Monks and novices of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery having their lunch



Fig.15. Monks of Taung-bi Nat taung monastery treat the local patients from remote cities with food

Conclusion

By studying the social and religious activities celebrate in the active ancient monasteries in Bagan, one can learn that most of the Myanmar Buddhist people practise the five or eight precepts and meditation. These are an essential part of the value systems of Myanmar culture. Based on these precepts, other cultural value systems such as generosity, hospitality, compassion, forgiveness, propriety and decency, knowledge and wisdom, peace and tranquillity and sympathy can be practised. These cultural, social and religious values and systems provide guiding principles to a good life for the Myanmar people. The study findings showed that ancient monasteries in Bagan are still playing key roles in performing Myanmar Buddhist faith and related social activities.

Monks and local lay people connections can be seen in the donation of food and other necessities for the monks. It is needed to support by Buddhist Myanmar people from other cities and native peoples and much knowledge can be given to the younger generations. In addition, many meditation centers have opened throughout the Bagan area. The government and non-governmental organizations also have to support the donations for the monks and the longevity of the Buddhist Sasana and sustainability of the intangible national cultural heritage.

The opening a free of charge clinic for local people in Bagan and other neighbouring cities at Taung-bi Nat taung monastery shows the relationship of the chief monk and local needy people under a doctor's care. Scholars can learn that tourists from various countries and religious beliefs would like to participate in social and religious activities such as how to donate food for monks in everyday life. They also see how the volunteer doctors in Bagan treat various kinds of patients from the whole country and how the monks' involvement to support local community needs.

Recommendation

The local people in Bagan-Nyaung Oo area are cohesive and perform various social and religious activities related to the ancient monasteries. Based on the community organization, there is needed to establish local civic organization for maintenance and preservation of ancient monasteries in Bagan and also the local people needs and their well-being. These functions are needed to support by the government and non-governmental organizations because these need funds to fill; also the social value on the ancient monasteries is needed to encourage for the younger generation. Further researches on the social and religious activities related to the ancient monasteries and Monks' involvement in Bagan and the activities performed by the monks as well as the role of the monks in Bagan- Nyaung Oo area merit further research.

Research postscript

In this research, Historicalism and Symbolism theory were used. Data collections were done as Desk Review, Key Informant Interview (KII), Participant Observation, taking photographs and recording with video for special activities associated with the monasteries under study was carried out. The data were assessed by symbolic approach to interpret and analyze the data from a cultural anthropology point of view. The ethical clearance from the informants' consents was obtained. The duration of this research was from 2008-2009 to 2011-2012.

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