

Society and festivals a case of *Sutaung Pye* Pagoda Festivals in *Thintwe* Quarter *Sadaung Town Sagaing* Region

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Abstract

Since in the monarchial days, the pagoda festival has been one of the characteristics of Myanmar Buddhism. The aim of this paper is to identify the *Sutaung Pye* Pagoda festival held in *Thintwe* Quarter, *Sadaung Town, Sagaing Region*. The objectives are to find out the behaviors of the people in the festivals, the connection between the festivals and community and to evaluate the role and functions of festivals in the community. The qualitative research method was applied. Research methods are the key informant interview (KII), natural group discussion and participant observation. It is found that *Sutaung Pye* pagoda festival is a religious as well as social festival in the local community. Beside, camera and records were used to record the data.

Key words: *Sadaung*, Pagoda festivals, *Sagaing*

Introduction

Religion is an important aspect of all human societies. Some cultural practices and traditions of society are derived from their religions. Rituals, rites and festivals are characteristics of religion and those exist in both sacred and secular contexts. Religious rites can be roughly divided into cylindrical and crisis rites. Cylindrical rites are regular and expected events such as, birth, marriage and death. Crisis rites are precipitated by unforeseen events, such as plagues, droughts, wars and other disasters.

Rituals play a number of important religious functions and meanings. They often store a great deal of information to be transmitted from generation to generation. The endless repetitions and dramatic nature of the events assure the maintaining of traditional knowledge with a great deal of accuracy. Therefore, in order to maintain the sustainability of the culture of each nation, traditional festivals and seasonable festivals, reflecting the culture of the nation and race are held and handed down these customs and cultures from generation to generation.

In Myanmar, since there are 12 seasons in a year, the seasonal festivals are held every year such as Thingyan festival in the month of Tagu; pouring of water on the sacred Bo tree in Kason; the ceremony of the monks' recitation of the Pali Texts in Nayon; the ceremony showing the horsemanship skills in Pyatho; the ceremony of preparing the glutinous rice in Tabotwe and the ceremony of Tabaung Pew in Tabaung. These

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ceremonies are held as seasonal festivals by Myanmar people in their villages and towns. Moreover, some people do novitiation, building pagodas, monasteries and repairing the roads and bridges, in the form of meritorious deeds, which may be regarded as little ceremonies which necessarily occur at irregular intervals. Such pagoda festivals, novitiation ceremonies and alms-donating ceremonies are held occasionally in villages and towns. Since in the monarchial times, the Buddhists hold religious festivals in cities and towns where pagodas are built annually festivals every year.

Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to identify the Sutaung Pye pagoda festivals held in Thintwe Quarter, Sadaung Town, Sagaing Region. The objectives are to find out the behaviours of the people in the festivals, the connection between the festivals and community and to evaluate the role and functions of festivals in the community.

Research Methodology

In this research, qualitative research method is used. Research tools are key informant interview, natural group discussion and participant observation. In this study, the researcher is the native of the community. Therefore, her point of view is the native point of view as well as the researcher point of view. Key informant interviews are conducted to search for the historical connection between festivals and community, to understand the behaviors of participants. In collecting the data about social groupings, natural group discussions are applied. The activities of festivals, such as recitations, cleaning the pagoda are observed for participant observation.

Location of the study area

Sadaung Town is located in Sagaing Region. There are ten quarters in Sagaing Region, and Sadaung Town is one of them. It comprises 15 village tracts while Sadaung Town includes ten quarters and three villages. The ten quarters of Sadaung are:

- (1) Thin Twe
- (2) Ye Kyi
- (3) Ywa Saik
- (4) Tha Htay Kone
- (5) Taung Bo
- (6) Pin Thin
- (7) Ywa Way
- (8) Kyaung Nauk
- (9) Mya Thein Tan New Quarter
- (10) Myo Ma Quarter

The three villages of Sadaung are:

- (1) Sha-Pinkan village

- (2) Myin-Kywa village
- (3) Nyaung Ngok To village

Sadaung is located at a distance of 27 miles to the north of Sagaing, lying on Sagaing-Shwebo road.

The Sutaung Pye Pagoda Festivals

Throughout the whole year, Sadaung is agog with religious activities such as pagoda festivals, alms donation, novitiation, Kathina robe offering, Pali text recitation and Pahtan Pali text recitation. There are 15 lent season pagoda festivals and 24 Out-of lent season pagoda festivals. The former pagoda festivals are held in serial in respective quarters. In some quarters stage shows are performed in pagoda festivals for the sake of youths. In pagoda festivals away from the quarters, the villagers of neighboring villages make offerings of alms and delicacies, or Myanmar traditional snacks to the monks. In some pagoda festivals, no alms food or such snacks are not offered but only the alms rice (uncooked) is offered as meritorious deed. Among these pagoda festivals, an account of Sutaung Pye Pagoda festival shall be discussed.

The Sutaung Pye pagoda festival is a main pagoda festival in Sadaung Town. The pagoda festivals are held in the designated months, and the three pagoda festivals are held on Kason (The Buddha Day), Waso (The Dhammacekja Day) and Thadingyut (from 13th waxing of Thadingyut to 2nd waning day). The festivals held on in Kason and Waso have the similar activities and donations by the local people. Therefore, the festivals held in Kason and Thadingyut are mainly focused in here.

The Sutaung Pye Pagoda Festival held on the Full Moon Day of Kason

The first festival of the Sutaung Pye pagoda is held on the full moon day of Kason. Before the festival, some preparations are made on 14th waxing of Kason. Since in the morning, the Sutaung Pye pagoda Parahita Youth headed by the trusteeship council prepare bowls to offer the monks offer flowers to the Buddha image; sweep the pagoda compound; fill up the pots with water for the pilgrims and fix up the lights, etc. In order to offer the monks visiting the pagoda festival, and give a treat to the pilgrims, cooking group prepares meals such as pork, fried chili, mango salad and vermicelli soup. While men are assumed for cooking women do shopping, cleaning the rice, removing the husks of onions, etc. Since at 3:00 pm, the trusteeship council announces the reception of donations by loud speaker. Not only the villagers of Thintwe Quarter but also people from other neighboring quarters coming to the pagoda festival donate money. At 8:00 pm the trusteeship council do packing of the meals to be offered to the monks coming to the pagoda festival.

On the Full Moon Day of Kason, rice vermicelli, is prepared in order to offer the monks and serve the pilgrims coming to the pagoda festival since dawn. The Sanghas are offered alms at the residences of the donors. According to the donor Mrs. Mya Win:

“We sister have been making offering of daybreak alms to the Sanghas for 18 years. We invite all monks, young and old, to our house; as well as our relatives and friends.”

At 6:00 am, the trusteeship council treated the pilgrims with rice vermicelli in the pagoda precinct. Then, one Neikbansaw (well-wisher for the start of a religious act) or a monk announces the donors to take positions for the Sangha Donation. Then, at 7:30 am, offerings such as alms, traditional snacks like Mont-Thoe-Mont, Pauk- Pauk Soke (popcorn ball), sesame snack, coffee-mix, mango and juice are made to the monks. After that, at 8:15 am, one Sayadaw shares the deed of merit with all beings, high and low in planes of existence, and the pagoda festival held on the Full Moon Day of Kason is successfully ended.

The Gazetted Sutaung Pye Pagoda Festival held in Thadingyut

To hold the pagoda festivals local people have to arrange preparation for donation and other activities especially the characteristics of pagoda festival and security. Those preparations are done by the social groupings¹ of the village.

Preparation for the Pagoda

Before the Pagoda festival, two meetings were held among the Trusteeship Council, Yar-Ein-Hmu (leaders of loo households), Hse-Ein-Hmu (leaders of 10 households), village head and respected people of the quarter. On the first meeting on the 10th waxing of Tawthalin, consultations were made for security in the festival, and arranging for funfairs.

The second meeting was done on the 4th waxing of Thadingyut. Lots were drawn to divide the duties for the security in the pagoda precinct. Firewood, oil, rice and necessary commodities were purchased for the preparations. About 2 months before the pagoda festival, contractors come and pay the deposits for the Zat, performance to the quarter head and Trusteeship Council. Moreover, in mess supply sector, pork, fish, dried fish, or prawns are chosen through consultations so that no extra food would remain nor the need of curry to serve.

With the leadership of head of the Ka-La-Thar (the leader of the local young man group), the Ka-La-Thar (young men) are invited to shop the firewood at night, because they are busy in the day time. The leader of the local young women also invites the young women and to purify the rice, which is served with tea salad, fries or steamed

¹ See Appendix

glutinous rice, etc. The teachers and students of Pyinya Pankhin Boarding House clear the pagoda compound, and whitewash the pagoda walls and assageways. Starting from 7th waxing of Thadingyut, lights are decorated on the pagodas; the archways of the pagoda are white washed and plots are made for shops and stalls by the Trusteeship Council. On the 8th waxing of Thadingyut, the Zatheafres, cinema halls and shops are built. On the 10th waxing of Thadingyut, the cooking group do preparing for the cooking: clearing the dried fish, removing the husks of onion, frying the onion chips, etc. On the 13th waxing, dried fish are boiled; dried fish are ground and chilies are fried. Young men and women do the clearing of the dried fish, preparing garlic and chilies. On the 14th waxing, the cooking group cooks meals (pork), and prepares Hsanun makin pudding and agar-agar jelly for serving then joining the alms donation round. The village administrative in charge, village heads and the trusteeship council make preparations for the round which would take place at 3:00 pm, on the Full Moon Day of Thadingyut. The cooking group do cooking for over 500 Sanghas who will come on the 1st waning day, as well as for the shopkeepers and the pilgrims to enjoy satudisa, free-of-charge food. The trusteeship council and the general service group undertake the duty of hiring the dinner tables and benches and plates and utensils for serving the satudisa². On the 2nd waning of Thadingyut, at 2 am daybreak, alms and carry are cooked, as well as pea and vermicelli soup. The Sutaung Pye Parahita Youths Group and the Mass Service Group prepare at 4:30 am for serving satudisa, the communal free-of-charge meal. So the Sutaung Pye pagoda festival engages all people, young and old, in their assigned tasks which are performed dutifully and happily.

Making of Traditional Snacks for the Offering during the Pagoda festival

A detailed account of making the traditional snacks for offering shall be given. The types of snacks are Mont-Thoe-Mont, Pauk-Pauk-Soke and Sesame snack. The Mont-Thoe-Mont snack according to the Donor of Snacks for the Sanghas. Mrs. Eim Tin, is made as follows: one Pyi (1/16 part of one basket) of broken rice is pounded. 70 kyat-thar of rice powder and jiggery are mixed in lukewarm water, till the thick liquid is obtained. Then it is fried in oil. One Pyi of broken rice costs about 60 kyat-thar of oil, producing about 100 sheets of snack.

To make Pauk-Pauk-Soke, according to Mrs. Khin Nyunt, one basket of popcorn weights 16 pyis plus P/2 vises of jiggery, 10 kyat-thar of pumpkin jam plus some butter plus some coconut shreds are all mixed in the right ratio. The mixture is left for about half an hour. Then one pyi of popcorn is pounded in a traditional lever. The former

² Feast given in the charity for all comers

mixture is taken in a handful, and to make it a ball, the pounded popcorn is applied one basket of popcorn produces 80 popcorn balls.

The Sesame snack, which is an essential snack, is every pagoda festival of Sadaung, according to Mrs. Kyi Hlaing, is made as follows:

“The sesame produced at home is mixed with salt and some grains of sand, and is roasted. Then, the sand is cleaned out. Frying one pyi of Sesame plus one pyi of glutinous rice are pounded in a traditional lever, and the obtained glutinous powder is mixed with pure sesame and is added to with some boiled water. Then, the fried sesame snack is soaked in jiggery liquid. It is back-breaking, but I don’t want to make offerings of ready-made snacks. The local snacks can be given as presents to the relatives living in cities. That’s why; I’ve been making these snacks every year.” It is learned that pagoda festival gives the chances to make and eat Myanmar traditional snacks in the local community

Holding Festival

There have been changes in the Sutaung Pye pagoda festival, between before 1990s and after 1990s. Before the 1990s, the pagoda festival was held for one day only: offering of alms, curry and snacks and lucky draw of stationery and a monk’s accessories were done: the latter form is a lucky draw both for monks young and old, both senior and junior in monkhood, donated in dedication to the Sangha in general. But after the 1990s, the pagoda festival is held for five days: from 13th waxing of Thadingyut to 2nd waning. The changes have take place after the initiative of Ven. Sayadaw U Jadila, the Abbot of Masoeyein Tawya (Reculse) Monastery, for the grand-scale celebration, and when the Sayadaw passed away, his disciple Mr. Kyaw Soe undertook the task of holding the pagoda festival. A gazette pagoda festival is a pagoda festival given permission by the state government, including some forms of entertainment such as film, boxing, *Chin Lon* performance competition and other fun fairs. Year 2013 was the 23rd anniversary of the pagoda festival. Even before the pagoda festival starts, the shopkeepers come and run such shops as China wares and utensils, plastic wares, blanket and pillows, tobacco, furniture, glass, fine woven mats and bamboo mats, iron wares, irons boxes, tapes on the Dhanma and songs, glasses and hand bags, restaurants, fries and traditional snack called Mont-paung (made of brown rice and glutinous rice), noodle, vermicelli, rice vermicelli, traditional snack called Mont-Thai- Chon, tea and cold drinks, betel quid’s and snacks, etc. Moreover, children can enjoy a ride on the merry-go-round and the magic show, etc.

On the first day, i.e., 13th waxing of Thadingyut, at 8:00 am, in the Prayer Hall In the precinct of the Sutaung Pye pagoda, the trusteeship Council announces the reception of cash donations with loud speaker, and a Neikban-saw announces the names of the individual donors. (A Neikban-saw invites the donation, says prayers for the

donor and gives entertainment to the audience by sharing the knowledge of Jataka stories to highlight the merits or donation). The cash donations are to be used for treating the pilgrims with some food free of charge, which is known as satudisa. Such a meritorious deed is done by masses for the merit of the masses. A group is organized for receiving the donation: one chairman, one secretary, one financier and one auditor. Tea salad, ginger salad and plain tea are a treat to the donor and the pilgrims. The trusteeship council and some women of the quarter are engaged in collecting to cash donations, which may be either in the form of monthly donation or out of one's generosity. There are 40 monthly donors. Cash donation collection is also some by the Sagaing-Shwebo road and in Thintwe Quarter. The days of cash donation collection are from 1st waxing of Thadingyut to the 3rd. Moreover, there are monthly and daily donors: from k.50 to k.1500 are donated every day. Though the days for collecting the cash donations (from 1st waxing of Thadingyut to the 3rd) are fixed, if the amount of donations has met the required demand, no donation collection is done any more. According to Mrs. Myint Myint Kyi of Thintwe Quarter, the cost of holding the pagoda festival per year ranges at least from 18 lakhs to 22 lakhs in kyat. Moreover, for the general use for the pagoda festival, the Cash Donation Reception is opened from 13th waxing of Thadingyut to 2nd waning day. According to Mr. Zaw Wun (40 years old):

“Pilgrims from the villages far and near come to this Pagoda festival, and contribute cash donations as much as they could afford during the pagoda festival days.”

At 7:00 pm, the women from the assigned Dhammacekja Association recite the Pali text every night for dispelling the evil and promoting the auspiciousness. They are given treats of ginger salad, tea salad, Indian pudding called Hsanun-makin and agar-agar, etc., for their service. Moreover, the cooking group prepares alms and meals for Sanghas and for those who are going to join the Alms Donations ceremony.

On the third day, on the Full Moon Day of Thadingyut, at 7:30 am, over 350 Sanghas dwelling in Sadaung are offered alms by the natives of Thintwe Quarter. After the Alms Donation, the Neikban-saw announces, for sharing of the merit among beings, high and low on the planes of existence, that alms food (e.g. fried chicken, fried fish, snacks, and fruits) can be made offering to the Buddha Image. At 3:00pm, the respected people of the quarter, young people, and member of the Dhammacekja Association come to the pagoda pound, and prepare for the round of the alms food. Lots are drawn to groups for the serial position.

The round systematically go as follows: (1) motorbikes leading the direction (2) the car carrying the Buddha Image reverently (3) Wut Association holding the Dhammacekja Boards of respective quarters (4) young ladies on parade, carrying the plates of alms food. Along the way, the local people give treats with tea leaf salad, ginger salad, and juice to

those on parade. Then, when they get back to the pagoda compound, Htoemont (traditional snack of glutinous rice) and Indian pudding or Hsanun-makin, are given treats.

On the 1st waning of Thadingyut, the Round of the Alms food is held: (1) the car carrying the Buddha Image and the Four Celestials reverently taking the lead of the procession (2) The plates of Alms food (3) flowers in bowls (4) the Sasana Flags (5) the white umbrella (6) the respective Dhammacekja Wut Association carrying their boards. Such a procession took place only in 1991 and in 1992, but no more after that because the weather conditions have been unfavorable, because the numbers of youths who have focused their attention to learning join the procession less and less and because people leave the village for cities for business. In the evening of the Full Moon Day, the natives of Thintwe Quarter give treats to friends, far and near, with tea salad, ginger salad, banana pudding, potato pudding, Indian pudding, agar-agar etc.

On the 1st waning of Thadingyut, the Cooking Group prepares meals for the pilgrims and shopkeepers and alms for the Sanghas. Moreover, on 2nd waning of Thadingyut, the lots for the monks are drawn for donation. For this, the donors make donations on waning of Thadingyut. Depending on the cash donation collected, lots of k. 5000 to k 10,000 is drawn for a monk. On 2nd waning of Thadingyut, at daybreak, the Sanghas are donated the “Lucky Draws” Donations at Thintwe Quarter. Since 5:30 am the pilgrims and the shopkeepers are given free of charge treats called satudisa: rice, fried chili, fried fish, pickled mango, and rice vermicelli soup.

On that day, since the number of donors is large, the donors have to make a date in advance, as well as a position. People, young and old, wear their best dresses, come to the pagoda compound and make alms donation for the Sangha. At 8:00am, over 500 Sanghas invited from far and near are donated offerings of every kind generously: alms, pork, pickled mango, banana, Yum Yum instant noodles, soap detergent powder, cash and snacks. Libation is done and the merits are shared. At 3:00 pm, the Lucky Draw Donation and the Rice Alms Donation are done by the people not- only from Thintwe Quarter but also from other regions. According to Mr. Kyaw Soe aged 94,

“I went round in Ywa-Saik Quarter, Pin-Thin Quarter, along the motor road and Thin/we Quarter and convened the people for donation rice alms.”

After the rice alms donation, and sharing of the merit the Sutaung Pye pagoda held in Thadingyut is successfully ended.

The Impacts of Pagoda Festival in Local Community

Religious Impacts

According to the Trusteeship Council Member Mr. Khin Maung Tint, the Sutaung Pye Pagoda was covered with tall grasses 1347(1985) years ago. There were only the Prayer Hall and the generator house in the pagoda compound. Today, the Dhammayon

Hall, Bummer Pole and Kitchen are being built in extension. In M.E 1352 (1990) Gazette Pagoda Festival, the found of the pagoda had increased, so now edifices were built. The cave entrance to the Pagoda was rather narrow, so in M.E 1358(1996), the Canopy Donor Daw Soe and her family built the entrance cave as a new donation. The Buddha Image was offered gilding of gold leaves only once a year in the former years, but since the pagoda festival became a gazetted festival, gilding three times per year has been done. During the gazetted pagoda festival, the cash donations for the Zat, shopkeepers and cinema shows are displayed on the fifth day after the end of the festival: 500000 K from the contractors of Zat entertainment; K. 150000 from cinema group; K.2500 per one shop from the shopkeepers. The cash donations were saved as the fund. The cash was lent to the villagers: 300000 to 500000 in kyat per one villager, which are re-collected by the time near the pagoda festival. Today, the fund is saved in the Kam Baw Za Bank, and is converted into wheat and pigeon peas in the Brokers' Warehouses. In lending money, the interest rate is reasonable. The monthly interest is used in offering gold leaves to the pagoda and whitewashing the Cetus and passageways. As the donations have increased from year to year, the fund has been on the increase.

Social Impacts

The number of donors in the Sutaung Pye Pagoda is the highest, and the Sanghas come from far and near. According to a monk:

“In the pagoda festivals in Sadaung, the local Sanghas, to be frankly speaking, do not like the local snacks like Mont-Thoe-Mont or Sesame snack or Pauk-Pauk- Soke, but the Sanghas and disciples from other regions enjoy these snacks, so we usually donate them away, as well as presents, so we get merit happily.”

This shows that the Sutaung Pye pagoda is not only a festival given special attention to by the local people, but also one which promotes the generosity, friendship and unity among the people far and near.

One of the natives who are working at other place said that;

I am working at Yangon for three years and I usually come back to village twice a year. When I came back during Sutaung Pye pagoda festival. I feel very happy. I could enjoy watching Zat Pwe with my friends, visiting to the houses of other relatives and having Myanmar traditional snacks a lot. So I always wait the time of pagoda festival.

The above statement shows that the natives who are going outside usually come back during the festival and enjoy it. Therefore, it can be said that the pagoda festival is the invitation for the people far and near.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Religious rituals consist of repetitive behaviors that communicate sacred symbols to members of society (Raymond Scupin, 2008). In this research, the pagoda festivals are held annually and the behaviors of donation and merit making are repetitive behaviors. Those behaviors are intended to the monks and lay people. In other words, through the behaviors of festival the communication among the lay people, monks are brought up. The processes and activities of festival are annually conducted by the people and it assures the unity of community and creates the reunion of the community.

The pagoda festivals are considered as Cylindrical Rites in the context of religion. From this study they are the rites of passage for the local community. Because, the young man and woman have to participate in the festivals and take duties respectively in the community. All of the people have to pass festival experiences annually and they are becoming seniors and they also transmit their knowledge to their juniors. These festivals are vehicles for the transmission of cultural and social knowledge of the community.

The donations are mainly intended to monks, religious practitioners. Besides, the constructing religious buildings and donating other necessities for pagoda are found in the manners of merit makings. At the final of the festival, sharing merits to other people can be seen. Therefore, sharing goods or merits is considered as a good movement in the community.

Conclusion

In Myanmar pagoda festival is one of the characteristics of Buddhism. The aim of this paper is to identify the Sutaung Pye pagoda festival held in *Thintwe* Quarter, Sadaung, Sagaing Township. The objectives are to find out the behaviors of the people in the festivals, the connection between the festivals and community and to evaluate the role and functions of festivals in the community. The qualitative research method was applied. Research methods are the key informant interview, natural group discussion and participant observation.

Since in the Monarchial day, the Buddhists have built pagodas donation. They celebrate pagoda festivals, novitiation ceremonies, build monasteries and donation ceremonies. Pagoda festivals have been held from generation to generation up to the present. Similarly, the local people have held the Sutaung Pye pagoda festival every year since 100 year ago, without a break up to the present.

The Sutaung Pye pagoda is a famous pagoda in Sadaung Town. Every Thadingyat, when the Sutaung Pye pagoda is held, the natives of Sadaung return home from wherever they are. In village since the full moon day of Thadingyut (Abidhamm Day) is a gazette holiday, the natives who have been serving duties in other places as government servants, officials and those from schools and companies never fail to return home. It is the time for the family re-union. It is the rare opportunity for young people to meet and

experience heart-beats. It is the festival for friends to meet again. Though there are many pagodas in Sadaung, and Sutaung Pye pagoda festival is annually celebrated with Zat pwes, puppet shows and film shows. All kinds of shopkeepers sell their goods and delicacies such as rice vermicelli, noodles, betel quid, and snacks and open run restaurants and food stalls at the festivals. So the native of Sadaung look forward to Sutaung Pye pagoda festival which offers fun fairs and family reunion.

The fund got from the pagoda festivals annually provides the religious buildings and necessary needs for the monks. Sharing goods, foods and merits are main characteristics of festivals. In conclusion, the pagoda festival under study is symbolized as generosity, friendship and unity among people far and near in the local community.

Appendices

Social grouping in Sadaung

Social welfare Associations in Sadaung can be divided into three; Religious group, Social welfare group and Administrative group. In religious groups, there are six groups and in social welfare, five groups, and one in Administrative group.

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