

Kahtein festival in Bagan ancient monasteries as the cultural foundations of Myanmar society

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the Kahtein festival in Bagan ancient monasteries as the **cultural foundations of Myanmar society**. It will be employed to make the new generation understand and value the Myanmar culture and encourage to preserve the ancient monasteries in Bagan according to their **intangible cultural heritage** and **tangible cultural heritage**. In this study, the meaning of “Kahtein” robe, reason for offering and receiving merits, the origin of Kahtein robe offering, the meaning of pa-de-tha tree and how to prepare it, a special significance for the Kahtein festival, the meaning of *Matho thingan* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits, the meaning of *Pant thaku* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits, the meaning of *Kya* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits and the Kahtein festival at the monasteries under study are presented. A case study design involving qualitative research methods was used. The sample of study site was Bagan - Nyaung Oo Central Area, Mandalay Division, Upper Myanmar. Methodology of the data collections were done as Desk Review, Key Informant Interview (KII), Participant Observation, taking photographs and recording with video were performed for special activities associated with the monasteries under study. And then, these data were studied, interpreted and analyzed from Cultural Anthropology point of view. The ethical clearance from the informants’ consents was got. Duration of this research was from 2008-2009 to 2011-2012.

Key words: cultural foundations of Myanmar society, intangible cultural heritage, tangible cultural heritage

Introduction

Bagan, the ancient city of Myanmar has many cultural monuments, cultural heritage and properties. The age of Bagan is 1262 years from A.D107 to A.D 1369. From that time to even nowadays, some of the cultural monuments still exist and can be studied.

There were altogether 55 kings who ruled Bagan and it was in the reign of King Anawrahta, the 42nd king of Bagan dynasty and the founder of the First Myanmar Empire. During his reign, Theravada Buddhism flourished.

Among them, monastery is the name used for a place where monks reside, meditate and preach the Buddhist scriptures for the learners and followers. Hence, monasteries in Bagan play an important role in Theravada Buddhism and also to produce the well-rounded, cultured gentlemen and ladies, capable of addressing any problem or situation in life with the maximum livelihood both success and personal happiness by sharing the Buddhist’s ways and philosophies. Moreover, the cultural value systems of Theravada Buddhism provide guiding principles for Myanmar people to lead a good life.

Based on the five precepts, Myanmar cultural value systems include generosity, hospitality, compassion, forgiveness, propriety and decency, knowledge and wisdom, peace and tranquility, sympathy, etc., could also be practiced in Myanmar people. Moreover, the Buddhist monks who live in these monasteries have to study the Buddha’s teachings and teach the Dhamma to the Buddhist people including novices and monastic students.

By studying them, the modern trends cannot shake the cultural foundations of Myanmar society and manage to preserve the national identity while striving at the same time to build a modern and developed nation. The law concerning with the maintenance and preservation of cultural heritage is firstly prescribed by the formerly State Peace and

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Development Council government in 1998. According to this law, a cultural heritage means an ancient site or ancient building which needs to maintain its historical, cultural, artistic and anthropological value.

At the General Conference of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Paris on 17 October 2003, described tangible cultural heritage as monuments or paintings, books or artifacts and intangible cultural heritage in the form of a list, as oral traditions and expressions such as epics, tales, and stories, performing arts - including music, song, dance, puppetry and theatre, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.(Richard Kurin, *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: a critical appraisal*, 2004).

Hence, the ancient monasteries in Bagan area are needed to be studied and maintained, and also needed to focus on the social values of these ancient monasteries from different perspectives. In this research, six famous ancient monasteries in Bagan-Nyaung-Oo area are studied because these ancient monasteries exist in Bagan area and the monks reside in this area from Bagan period to nowadays. Therefore, these monasteries are regarded as tangible cultural heritage and the role of the monks and their social practices for the native people in Myanmar society are regarded as intangible cultural heritage.

The aim of this research is to explore the Kahtein festival in Bagan ancient monasteries as the **cultural foundations of Myanmar society**. It will be employed to make the new generation understand and value on the Myanmar culture and encourage to preserve the ancient monasteries in Bagan according to their **intangible cultural heritage** and **tangible cultural heritage**. In this study, the meaning of “Kahtein” robe, reason for offering and receiving merits, the origin of Kahtein robe offering, the meaning of pa-de-tha tree and how to prepare it, a special significance for the Kahtein festival, the meaning of *Matho thingan* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits, the meaning of *Pant thaku* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits, the meaning of *Kya* robe, reason for the offering and receiving merits and the Kahtein festival at the monasteries under study are presented.

A case study design involving qualitative research methods were used. The sampling of study site was Bagan - Nyaung Oo Central Area, Mandalay Division, Upper Myanmar. Methodology of the data collections were done as Desk Review, Key Informant Interview (KII), Participant Observation, taking photographs and recording with video were performed for special activities associated with the monasteries under the study. And then, these data were studied by symbolic approach and interpreted and analyzed from Cultural Anthropology point of view. The ethical clearance from the informants’ consents was got. Duration of this research was from 2008-2009 to 2011-2012.

Findings

In this research, not only the offering of the Kahtein robes but also the weaving of Matho thingan , Pant thaku robe and Kya robe are presented because these traditions are held during the month of Tazaungmone (November).

In Bagan area, the Kahtein festival is held by the native Buddhist people. The elaboration of this festival is based on the native Buddhist people’s economy. But most of them donated the Kahtein robes and other necessary things to the monks annually. If they cannot afford by individuals, they make communal donation. Whatever, the donation of Kahtein robes and other items make the financial support to the monks who live in the ancient monasteries in Bagan. Moreover, various economic activities are performed by the native people and the roles of the monks are important in these activities. Among them, the Kahtein festival is also held in some active monasteries in the research area; Minnanthu Lei-

myet-hna monastery, Nat-taung monastery or Mya-taung taik, Taung-bi Nat taung monastery, Shin Arahan Oakkyaung monastery (Hnget Pyit Taung monasteries) and Tamani monastery.

(i) The meaning of the word “Kahtein”

The Kahtein festival is traditionally held in Tazaungmon month (November). The word “Kahtein” is derived from a Pali word “Kahtina” meaning firm or durable. The offering of the yellow robes to the monks is considered as one of the most meritorious deeds and important rite and then these are called the Kahtein robes. The offering is made communally with all the trimmings of music, folk dances, professions and refreshments.

(ii) The origin of Kahtein robe offering

The origin of Kahtein robe offering dates was believed in the life time of the Buddha. Evidences of Kahtein robe offering festival in Tazaungmon was founded in stone inscriptions and Myanmar literature since the time of Bagan or even earlier. Myanmar chronicles have records of the Kahtein robe offering festival sponsored and participated by the royalty. In Treatise on the Court ceremonies and festivals compiled by Minister Thiri Uzana of Innwa period, a contemporary account of Kahtein robe offering festival is given.

(iii) The highlight of the Kahtein robe offering

The highlight of the Kahtein robe offering is the weaving of Matho thingan (rodk;ouFef;) which is literally translated meaning “non-stale” robe. It is called because the robes are not allowed to go stale, that is to say, they are woven within the space of the night. It is also a priestly garment made all at once and it has to be woven on the night of the fullmoon of Tazaungmon. If the weaving of this garment takes longer than the allotted period, the garment is regarded as “stale”. (Khin Myo Chit; *Colourful Myanmar*, 1995, Third Edition)

It is believed to start in the lifetime of the Buddha and his foster mother Gotami made a robe for him. It was woven with the finest cotton skillfully. Gotami herself took part in the weaving. When finished she took it with pomp and ceremony to the Buddha residing at Nijorda Vihara and offered it to the Buddha image. Myanmar kings held competitions of Matho thingan weaving at the palace and the winners were awarded prizes. The Konbaung set (Chronicle of Konbaung dynasty) mentions the holding of such competition at the Mandalay Palace in the reign of King Thibaw (AD 1878-85).

The weaving of Matho thingan cannot be found in the monasteries which are done by research because most of the local people do their business based on tourism; renting the rest house, hotels, making the lacquer ware, selling food, driving pony cart and they buy the robes from Pakokku and Mandalay. Most of them offer to the Buddha images or monks with Pant thaku robe and Kya robe.

Pant thaku (yef.oul) is a word derived from Pali which means clothing, food or anything left on the ground for anyone to take. There was no donor of robe to the Buddha during the first twenty ordained years. Therefore, the Buddha and his disciples had to go around for collecting clothing left on the ground for making robes by themselves. Such kinds of robes were called Pant thaku robes. Later, Pant thaku became a common meaning- any offering by any unknown donor to an anonymous recipient. Greater merit is gained by offering Pant thaku because no personal attachment is involved as both the donor and the recipient are unknown to each other. On the fullmoon night of Tazaungmon, robe or any utensil or dry ration is placed by the donor on the ground near the monasteries. The monk who finds it brings it to the superior monk to ask whether it is a Pant thaku offering or lost property. The monk who finds Pant thaku offering is entitled to use it.

Kya(မုမ) robe is lotus robe woven with the threads made of lotus stems. Lotus flower is the symbol of Buddhism. Four lotus flowers represent the four Buddhas already and one lotus bud represents the future Buddha. Lotus robe is fine and light. It makes the wearer cool in summer and warm in winter. The Buddha had worn lotus robes offered by some donors. At present in Myanmar, lotus robes are woven in the Shan State, the Mon State and the Rakhine State for offering to the reputed learned head monks on the fullmoon day of Tazaungmon.

(iv) The tradition of pa-de-tha trees

In the Kahtein festival, one of the most interesting traditions of Myanmar Buddhist people is going around the village with pa-de-tha tree. The word “pa-de-tha” in Myanmar is synonymous with plenty, and inexhaustible wealth. The pa-de-tha trees are offered to the monks, who may be going to their home town or on their mission after they had to stay in the monasteries during the Lenten season because the ban on travelling was limited to the end of the lenden season. It is the time when they will be in need of robes and other articles of use.

Moreover, during the Kahtein festival, the pa-de-tha tree is going around anywhere in town, in streets and markets with a lot of preparations for Kahtein robe offering to the monk in progress. The Pa-de-tha-trees, wooden triangular structures, and hung with things like sets of yellow robes and other articles such as the Buddha images, alms bowls, umbrellas, towers, napkins, cups and such useful things big and small, utensils, soaps, various kinds of medicine, books, pencils, pens, slippers, mats, a kyat note, a handkerchief, a cake of soap- no matter however small etc, are displayed in front of the decorated marquees.

Today, during the season, it is heart-warming to see lots of pa-de-tha trees growing among festivities. They represent dhana of local people’s unswerving faith in Buddha’s teaching and also the trust and belief among the people in community. All these go to make the annual Kahtein offerings a great joy.

(v) The merits for the monks and the donors

In addition, monks who receive Kahtein robe and monks who express their appreciation at the offering and receiving of Kahtein robe by uttering “Sadu” (welldone) three times, gain **five durable merits**. These five durable merits are the special rights of certain rules of vinaya governing the monks such as:

- (i) Monks can go out to the donor’s house who invites them for offering food, without informing the other monk nearby, even if the donor has accidentally used improper language in inviting.
- (ii) Monks who have resolved to practice the Ti-cavara austerity (possessing a robe of three garments only) are permitted to go out without carrying the resolved robe with them.
- (iii) Robes received can be worn by monks without performing certain religious procedure.
- (iv) Even, when an invitation for food offering comes in an improper manner, at least four monks and above can accept it.
- (v) Monks of the monastery where Kahtein robes are offered for the monks can wear these robes.

The donor of the Kahtein robe attains the following merits:

- (i) There shall be no danger or disturbance wherever the donor travels.
- (ii)The donor will have plenty of good and healthy food. He will never suffer from food-poison.
- (iii)The donor’s property is safe from destruction, robbery, or theft.
- (iv)The donor will recover the long forgotten property.
- (v)The donor will get wealth without much difficulty.

(vi) The donor will have a good look.

The robes offering to the monks has no restriction. Donors can offer one piece or the whole set of robe to any monk at anytime. But there are strict rules and time limit in offering Kahtein robe. The limited period for offering Kahtein robe to the monks is from the first waning moon day of Thadingyut (October) to the fullmoon day of Tazaungmon (November). The donor and the recipient must observe this time limit. One of the three pieces of robe is offered as Kahtein robe. The donor must have a sincere intention and must donate Kahtein robe out of his voluntary will. The donor intends to offer Kahtein robe not only to an individual monk or monastery but also to all members of the Buddhist order as a whole. Moreover, monks must never request directly or indirectly anyone, even parents or relatives to donate them robe. According to Vinaya, if monks are in need of robe and there is no donation of robe, they must collect discarded clothes, wash them clean, dye them with bark, piece and sew them together to wear as robe. Recipients of Kahtein robe are selected in accordance with the rules regarding Kahtein robe. Not any monk and not all monks are eligible to receive Kahtein robe.

The deserving recipients are those who have:

- (i) observed Purima Wa or first lent (the first waning day of Waso (July) to the fullmoon day of Thadingyut (October);
- (ii) performed the Pawa rana (a confession of monks to one another) on the fullmoon day of Thadingyut;
- (iii) have no record of breaking or neglect of a law of lent vow;
- (iv) storage of robe; and
- (v) being the most senior monk among those who are in real need of robe.

In the sima or ordination hall, the selection of the deserving recipient of Kahtein robe is carried out by an assembly of monks. The monk who has the above mentioned qualifications can accept the Kahtein robe. The recipient has to discard the piece of the robe he is wearing which is corresponding to that of Kahtein robe offered him. He makes a mark on the accepted Kahtein robe. He declares in Pali that the Kahtein robe has been offered and accepted in accordance with the rules of Vinaya laid down by the Buddha. Then he requests all monks present to share in the merit by exclaiming word of appreciation “Sadu” (well done) three times.

Everyone can donate Kahtein robe but each monastery is entitled to one Kahtein offering a year. Kahtein robe must be untainted, clean, new, not borrowed one or second hand one. It is a pure religious offering by voluntary will of the donor.

(vi) A special significance for the Kahtein festival

There is no restriction whatsoever when robes should be offered to the monks nowadays. Everyone can make the offering any time to any monk; but the Kahtein robe offering has a special significance. This is a special time, the time, when, after long months of seclusion in the monasteries, monks make preparations to go on trips to see and pay respects to their teachers and parents.

At such a time, many monks are in need of new robes. Offering robes and other gifts, in this season is made not to any individual monk, but to the Order as a whole so that the needy ones shall get the robe. Offering gifts to monks, if it is to bear highest fruition, must be made to the Order as being human, are often moved to offer gifts to monks by personal feelings, like partiality or attachment. Although such other acts are, in their own way, meritorious deeds, the fruition is not as great as the act of giving to the Order of monks.

Offering special robes and other gifts make in the Order of monks during the season keeps alive the true spirit of offering as taught by the Buddha. All the gifts are offered to the Order so that the needs of the poorest monks are suitably supplied. According to the rule a

group of monks who have spent the lent period under a senior monk in a monastery is eligible as an institution to accept the gifts called the Kathina gifts.

(vii) The Kahtein festival at the monasteries under study

In Bagan area, the Kahtein festival was held by the native Buddhist people. The elaboration of this festival was based on the native Buddhist people's economy. But most of them donate Kahtein robes and other necessary things to the monks annually. If they cannot afford by individuals, they make communal donation. Whatever, the donation of Kahtein robes and other items makes the financial support to the monks who live in the ancient monasteries in Bagan.

In the selected research monasteries, various economic activities were performed by the native people and the role of the monks is important in these activities. Among them, the Kahtein festival was also held in some active monasteries in the research area; Minnanthu Lei-myet-hna monastery, Nat-taung monastery or Mya-taung taik, Taung-bi Nat taung monastery, Shin Arahan Oakkyaung monastery (Hnget Pyit Taung monasteries) and Tamani monastery.

Among them, Nat Taung monastery or Mya- taung taik celebrate elaborately in the olden days. In this monastery, the Kahtein festival was held since in the 18th century. On the wall painting of Nat Taung pagoda, the scene of Kahtein festival could be seen. The native people celebrated the communal donation of Kahtein festival in the olden days and they go around the village with pa-de-tha tree. But nowadays, most of the native people donate the Kahtein festival individually and sometimes, the donors from Mandalay city donate communal donation. They do not go around the pa-de-tha tree in the village and they make the pa-de-tha tree in the compound of the monastery until the full moon day of Tazaungmone (November). They prefer to donate the Kahtein festival according to the suitable time of the invited monks. Sometimes, two donations coincide during one day.(See in Fig-1).



Fig.1. The scene of Kahtein festival at Nat Taung pagoda

In other Taung-bi Nat Taung monastery, the Kahtein festival is also held annually. The native people who live in the Taung-bi village celebrate the festival with individual or communal donation. Most of the communal donations are the donation of the Taung-bi village's bazaar, the donation of the staff of the bus station, the donation of the family, the donation of the people of the Hotel and the donation of the people who are observing the Sabbath. Some of the donors go around the village with the pa-de-tha tree. There is no mandat or pavilion to build for the donation.

In the Tamani monastery, the Kahtein festival is held by individual or communal donation annually. Most of the communal donations are the donors of the four bus station organization from the Mandalay city, the donors from the Nay-pyi-taw city and the donors of the lacquer ware business from the new Bagan city. They donate the robes, money, wooden bureau, television, cooking utensils, etc. The donors invite eleven monks or fifteen monks or twenty monks from other monasteries. They offer the *hsun*: (ခနံ) (rice and curry) to the monks and donate the robes and other necessary things. In the Minnanthu Lei-myet-hna monastery, the villagers of the Minnanthu donate the Kahtein festival individually. Near the monastery, there exist seven villages and ten monasteries. These ten monasteries invite the chief monk of the Minnanthu Lei-myet-hna monastery for the donation of the Kahtein festival and donate the robes, money, bed, mattress and mosquito net. In the Shin Arahan Oakkyaung monastery (Hnget Pyit Taung monastery), the Kahtein festival is celebrated individually. Most of the donors come from the Nyaung-Oo city and the new Bagan city. In the Hsutaung-pyi monastery, there exists the wooden structure of the residence of the nun nowadays and there is no monastery. Therefore, it cannot celebrate the Kahtein festival.

Conclusion

To sum up, during the season of Kahtein festival, it is great to see lots of *pa-de-tha* trees growing among the festivities. They represent the spirit of dhana and people's faith in the Buddha's teaching and also the trust and kindness among in the community. All these go to make the annual Kahtein offerings a great joy. By doing community based activities of the Kahtein festival at the ancient monasteries, Myanmar Buddhist people including the young and the old, raise their national spirit and uplift to maintain their ancient monasteries which still existed in Bagan area.

Moreover, donating the Pant thaku robe makes them many advantages because no personal attachment is involved as both the donor and the recipient are unknown to each other. And then, one can get the merits of donating the Kya robe to the monk because this robe is suitable for the monk's health according to the weather condition.

By studying these facts, the Kahtein festival makes and raises the spirit of Myanmar cultural value, unity, friendship, mutual understanding and negotiation. Moreover, the most interesting thing in this festival is that any stranger or passerby regardless of race, religion, rank, or creed, is welcome to donate the robes and other necessary things and decorate the *pa-de-tha* tree.

Finally, this study encouraged to explore the new generation about the Kahtein festival in Bagan ancient monasteries as the cultural foundations of Myanmar society and value on the Myanmar culture and then promote to preserve the ancient monasteries in Bagan according to their intangible cultural heritage and tangible cultural heritage.

Recommendation

For the recommendation, the local people in Bagan-Nyaung Oo area cohesive each other and perform the various activities related to the ancient monasteries under research study. Therefore, based on the community organization, there is needed to establish local civic organization for maintenance and preservation of ancient monasteries in Bagan. Moreover, these functions are needed to support by the government and non-governmental organizations because the fund for the maintenance and preservation of ancient monasteries is also needed to fill and the social value on the ancient monasteries is needed to encourage for the younger generation.

Further researches for the activities performed by the monks and the role of the monks in Bagan- Nyaung Oo area have to be studied more. After that, the function of the maintenance and preservation of ancient monasteries in Bagan and their intangible and tangible national cultural heritage has to be researched.

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