

Religious Beliefs of Taungyo Nationals in Waphyutaung village tract in Yamethin Township, Mandalay Region

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Abstract

All societies have possessed beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion. It consists of beliefs and behavior patterns which are constantly changing due to many factors. People are usually conscious of their adaptive strategies, but often do not discern the adaptive processes. This research aims to point out the changes of religious beliefs of Taungyo people in Buddhism before and after 2002, and to explore the community's responses to these changes. The study site is Waphyutaung village tract of Yamethin Township in Mandalay Region. The data was collected by qualitative research methods. The research tools used were in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and participant observation. This study is a comparison between the circumstances of religious beliefs and behavior patterns prior to gold mining (before 2002) and those that following gold mining (after 2002). The Taungyo people's belief in Buddhism encompasses form of worship, the pagoda building and its renovation, the planting of the sacred Bodhi tree, the construction of monastery and its renovation, and the interrelationship between the *sangha* and villagers. By comparing the conditions before and after 2002, this research has identified various changes in forms of worship, behavior patterns and belief. Religious buildings have become more varied and increased in number. This is the region's interrelationship with surrounding areas due to Gold Mining. This study shows that there have been some changes in the local people's religious beliefs and behavior patterns.

Key words: Buddhism, Taungyo people, adaptive strategies, adaptive processes

Introduction

There are many societies in the world. All societies have possessed beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion. It consists of beliefs and behavior patterns which are constantly changing in response to the changing requirements of the environment: not only the physical environment but also the social environment.

Religious changes can be seen as ways adapt to new environments. The concept of cultural adaptation is divided into two parts: adaptive strategies and adaptive processes (Bennett, 1969 & Kottak, 1991). People are usually conscious of their adaptive strategies but often do not discern adaptive processes. The various processes of cultural changes identified by cultural anthropologists are diffusion, acculturation, innovation, or invention. In this study, the changes will be mainly looked at as a process of acculturation. Acculturation means the process that takes place when contact between two societies is so prolonged that one or both cultures change substantially.

With this in mind, the Taungyo people were studied in the Waphyutaung village tract of Yamethin Township, Mandalay Region, Myanmar (See figure- 1). Yamethin Township comprises 63 village tracts and 243 villages. Of them, the Waphyutaung village tract is about 23 miles far to the south-east of Yamethin Township. This tract consists of Lower Waphyutaung village, Upper Waphyutaung village, Kyaunggone village and Chaungphyar village. Among them, the three villages with the exception of Chaungphyar village which has the most Myanmar people were chosen as the study area. The area of Waphyutaung village

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tract is 82,631 acres. There are 470 households and 2,262 people including 735 Taungyo people.

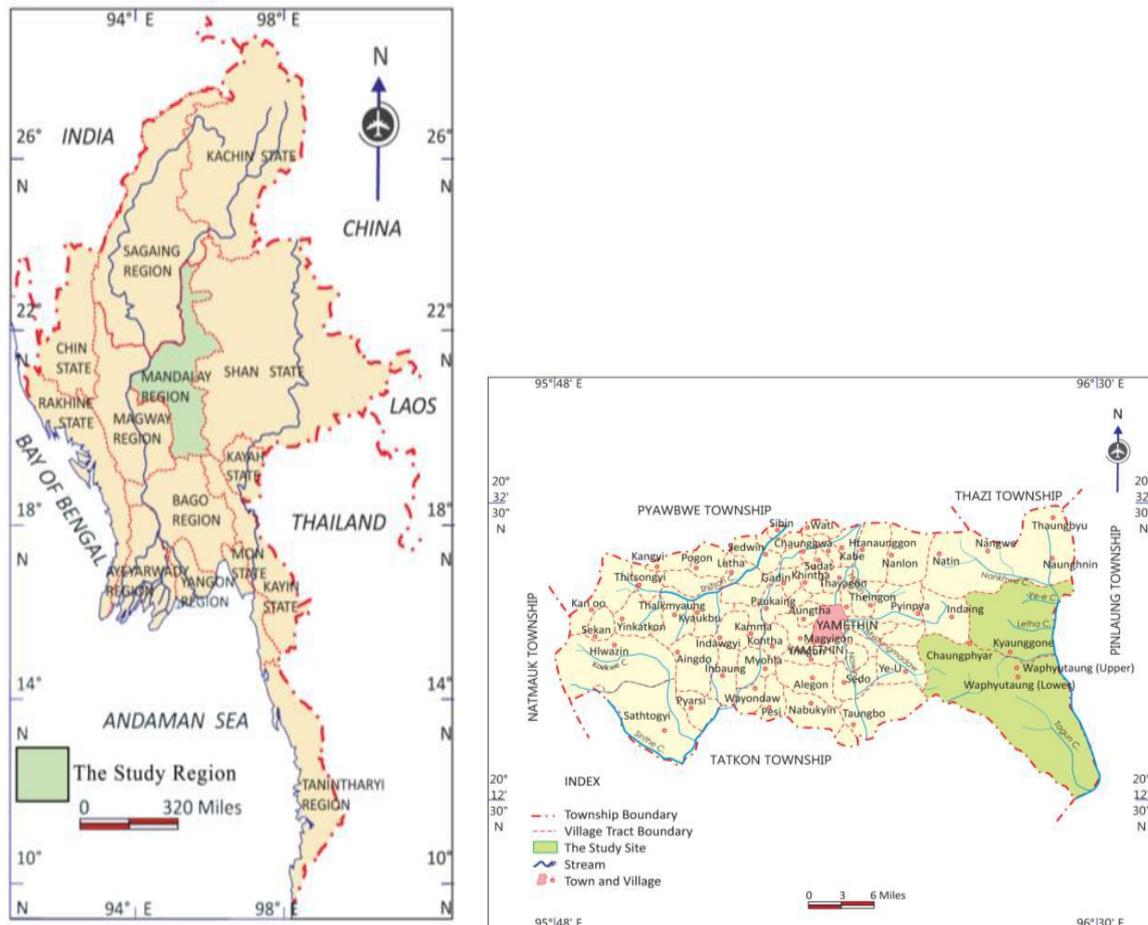


Figure- 1: The study sites of Mandalay Region (left) and Yamethin Township and Waphyutaung village tract (right)

Source: Land Records Department (November, 2014)

Aim

This research aims to point out the changes of religious activities of Taungyo people in their interactions with Buddhism before and after 2002, and to explore the community's responses to these changes.

Research questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. How and why have the Taungyo people's religious belief changed before and after 2002?
2. What consequences had come to the locals due to those changes?

Methodology

The qualitative research method was applied in collecting data. The research tools used were in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and participant-observation. A total of 29 interviewees participated in the data collection. They were monks, administrators, older persons and so on.

Findings

Belief in Buddhism

The Taungyo people have believed since their forefather's time in Buddhism only. Being Buddhists, they believe in 'Karma' and its consequences, that one's good deed will bring one a good consequence, and one's evil deed, a bad consequence. They also believe that only steadfastly taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha will prevent one from being cast into the four nether worlds in one's afterlife. They believe in an afterlife so they do alms-giving and keeping to the moral precepts of Buddhism as much as possible in the present life so that they would have a good existence next. Before 2002, the locals always took time off from their hillside cultivation to go to the monastery on Buddhist days of significance during or outside of the Lent. That journey was made at the past urging of Pantaung Sayadaw Bhaddanta Caritta (see Figure- 2) who resided at Pantaung where lies about seven miles from that village. Nearly all the villagers went to monastery to keep sabbath or not. Regarding this a 53-year-old Bamar woman of Lower Waphyutaung village said:

"Pantaung Sayadaw urged us to go the whole family to the monastery for sabbath-keeping. So, all the members of a household would go to monastery to keep precepts, not leaving even one behind to look after the house. So they really get to visit the monastery and pay obeisance to monks. In this way, even if they do not keep precepts they earn merit to a more or less extent. They won't earn any merit if they do not visit the monastery."



Figure- 2: Pantaung Sayadaw Bhaddanta Caritta

The locals collect offerings such as joss sticks, candles, food, delicacies, garden produce and flowers one day in advance in preparation for a visit to the monastery. Early in the morning on the sabbath day they offer food, flower, lights, and glasses of water to the Buddha and pay obeisance to the Three Gems. After breakfast at about 8:00 am nearly all the villagers went to the monastery taking the offertories. Once at the monastery, they place the offertories before the monks and sit down at their usual place. The monks and novices sit on a dais

(သံဃာစဉ်/*sanghasin*) which is nine inches higher. The assembly is thus seated because the *sanghas* were considered to be nobler than the laity. On the right side top place laymen (aged above 40) followed by laywomen of similar age sit; while on the left side top place younger men (aged under 40), followed by women of similar age sit. In the seated congregation older men sit on the right and young men on the left because right side is considered to be superior in power than the left side. Moreover, the men sit forwards and the women backwards because they believed man was supposedly superior to woman. Then they follow the hearing of the monks' preaching and the symbolic water pouring with sharing of merits gained. Members of the congregation listen to the preaching that is provided with a little popcorn (roasted glutinous rice). Thus listening to monks' preaching was to mark the ending of sabbath. After the sharing of merits gained and eating of the popcorn, the preaching was broadcast inside the monastic enclosure, hoping that all the locals' endeavours would come to fruition. Because their literacy was low, someone had to lead the recital so that the rest could follow suit in unison. Regarding this, a 57-year-old Upper Waphyutaung village of Taungyo nationality said:

"When they took precepts from the monks who are Bamar, their village elder lead the recitation and others follow suit."

After listening to the senior monks discourse sabbath-keeping they all went home. At about 8:00 am the following morning all the people came back to the monasteries with offertories, listening together to the monk's discourse and, upon ending the sabbath, they all had a morning meal altogether and then went home. That meal was a public donation at the expense of every householder in the village which was incurred through cash donations collected by teams of bachelors and maidens. Thus they ended the locals' sabbath-keeping, which took two days.

Moreover, if the sabbath-keeping event fell on days of religious significance (full moon of *waso* (July-August) and *thidingyut* (October-November) and *Akyat* day of water festival (April) every family went, in the evening of sabbath day's eve, to pay obeisance to parents, uncles, aunts, and village elders. taking gifts they could afford. In addition to wishing aloud their wellbeing in their own language concerned, the honorees also entertain the visitors with plain tea, delicacies, fried and roasted beans, betel and pickled tea-leaf. Again, the local people mutually paid obeisance to monasteries and village elders, to be more united and friendly among them. Regarding this, a 78-year-old Taungyo man of Kyaunggone village said:

"The villagers from three villages came from Shan State and are all relatives. Therefore the elders of kinsfolk are paid respects on days of religious significance."

After 2002, the sabbath-keeping custom continues but some changes are found in case of the minority of locals, namely: doing carry service on the sabbath day; running a stall; staying behind at home to look after it; often leaving their children behind at home; being seated in disorder at listening to the monk's discourse; no popcorn is distributed after listening to the monk's preach; all the people can recite precepts and other texts without a person to lead the recital; and the locals are joined in sabbath keeping by nearby personnel connected with gold undertakings. On this a 65-year-old Taungyoe man of Upper Waphyutaung village said:

"We have been Buddhists since my parents' time to my children's. Our villagers as well as others believed in Pantaung Sayadaw who always admonished us through his preach to be well-behaved and cultured, shun evil deeds, and be possessed of good character. Once a person offered alms-food to him on the road, but miraculously at the same time another found him asleep at the monastery and yet another found him walking to a certain village. Therefore the

villagers considered him an arahat (saint). Thinking highly of this exceptional monk, we have since been living in accordance with his teachings."

Again, a 35-year-old Taungyo people of Lower Waphyutaung village said:

"Pantaung Sayadaw was worried Buddhism would dim hereabouts after his demise. He had asked us to find a good monk to take his place who could take care of our spiritual needs and morals. So, while I was at Mandalay for medical treatment I got to chat with monks of Dhammikarama Monastery, Shwethin Dhammacariya Kyaungtaik and respectfully asked them to come and take charge of abbotship at our village. They have since obliged accordingly to our benefit. Local villagers are still following their teachings and advice."

Building pagodas and their renovation

In the distant past this locality had very few contacts with other regions because of the penetration by rebels and difficult communications. It rarely occurred to the locals that they should build some pagodas. Every village had a monastery but missionary monks stayed for a short time only in order to meet the spiritual needs of the villagers who were often faced with difficulties. As the locals could have wrong views and come to worship blameworthy persons the Pantaung Sayadaw residing nearby constructed a pagoda in 1948 (see Figure- 3) about a mile south of Lower Waphyutaung village. Because of the scarcity of bricks the pagoda was built with stones and named *Kotaungpyae* or *Taungbettaung* pagoda. Then its original height of about 14 feet was raised to over 30 feet and the new name of *Pyaylonechanthar* pagoda was also given (see Figure- 3). On this a 58-year-old Taungyo man of Upper Waphyutaung village said:

"As far as I remember, in my youth, father said, rebels often came to our villages to make demands. It was difficult journey going to Yamethin; only ten people at the maximum in each village had been there. We seemingly lived in seclusion. Pantaung Sayadaw was apparently worried some villagers might be holding wrong views and might come to worship blameworthy persons, so he built a pagoda on a hill near the locality."

The "hti" (the ornamental on a pagoda) was ceremonially hoisted atop the pagoda on April 1951 (second waxing moon of *Tagu*, 1313 ME). Since then the pagoda festival has been held yearly on second day of Myanmar New Year. Moreover, Buddhist festivities like food offering to the Buddha and washing Buddha statue with water are regularly held on days of religious significance.



Figure- 3: The original (left) and renovated (right) *Pyaylonechanthar* pagoda

During 1997-2002 the locality saw better roads for their trial activities of gold digging. For this reason mutual exchange between locals and non-locals increased more than before. Thus a desire arose in the people of Waphyutaung village tract to build a pagoda in each village. At that time Pantaung Sayadaw was not in permanent residence in the locality and was too old to work for the promotion of the *sasana*. Therefore the locals started saving money and properties in excess of their needs by way of preparation.

After 2002, the locals had more surplus money than before for saving thanks to their prosperity due to being frequently involved in gold-related business, conducted together with their agricultural work. Moreover, while the companies were running locally a group led by village elders visited them once every three or six months to ask for donations for the construction of pagoda. In 2011 a pagoda named *Yadanaaung*, 21 feet high, was built inside Kyaunggone village's monastic compound. On this a 70-year-old Taungyo man of Kyaunggone village said:

"Formerly we dared not dream of building a pagoda; our hillside farming was at subsistence level. But with gold digging activities our villagers have come to engage in associated businesses and earn money much enough to save. They raised funds for building pagodas. Moreover, village elders set up a booth for cash donation at the top of the village, or visited the gold business company for the same purpose. Thus a pagoda has been built soon enough to grace the village."

Thus by now, the two villages excepting Upper Waphyutaung village are found to have pagodas. At those new pagodas lights, flowers and glasses of drinking water are regularly offered to the Buddha on days of religious significance.

Planting the sacred banyan "Bodhi tree"

The locals believed that a pagoda must be accompanied by the banyan, so they were eager to grow one in the precincts of a pagoda. At that time Yamethin Township was sharing out sacred banyan saplings and this village tract received one of them. But each village wanted to be the site of the banyan sapling. Finally a site north of *Pyaylonechanthar* pagoda was chosen and the sapling was planted on May 1949 (the full moon day of *Kason*, 1311 ME). On planting it, a regional elder made a vowed prayer, exclaiming:

"This Bodhi tree is representative of our village tract. The villagers may pray for what they desire while I am pinching the top sprout. May your wish be fulfilled."

While the elder was doing so, all the villagers unitedly made a vowed prayer thus:

"If this tree be representative of our village tract, may four sprouts grow forth."

In a few days' time four sprouts grew out of a single banyan tree, and to date the four branches coming out of a trunk are still seen. Since the planting of sacred banyan tree date the ceremony of pouring water on it has been held yearly on second day of Myanmar New Year (see Figure-4).



Figure- 4: Pouring water on the sacred Bodhi tree

Construction and repairs of the monastery

Before 2002, villages in Waphyutaung village tract were small but each had built a monastery for itself. The monasteries, roofed with galvanized iron sheets, had planks for walls and flooring but they were dilapidated for being many years old (see Figure- 5). They needed repairs but remained the same because of unfavourable economic circumstances of the villagers. On this an 82-year-old Taungyo man of Kyaunggone village said:



Figure- 5: The original (left) and renovated (right) monastery at Kyaunggone village

"In the past our village monasteries were not brick buildings like those of today. They were all wooden. Over time they became rundown so villagers tried to raise funds to build a new monastery but they could not succeed due to their economic circumstances. So the monks had to reside in the same old dilapidated monasteries doing what repairs they could."

However, after 2002 the locality and its environs had viable gold digging business and the locals became involved in gold-related business in addition to their farm work. They became prosperous and could collect more money for monastery construction. Moreover, teams led by village elders, village administrator, 100-household Head and 10-household Heads go off to gold business companies and shops every three months or six months to seek donations. Due to the charity of villagers and migrant workers and business persons every village monastery now has more religious buildings than before. Those former wooden monasteries have been replaced by brick ones. Moreover, separate religious buildings like refectory, single-use monastic residences, and pagodas have been built. Before 2002 at *Taungbet-taung* monastery there were monks from other regions in temporary residence. Then it fell into disuse. *Tawya* monastery appeared in 2005 as a hut giving shelter to some monks. Later locals and people in gold undertakings came to pay respects to them in adoration and that dwelling became a proper monastery.

The relationships between the *sangha* and villagers

Before 2002, the monasteries had monks only and novices were almost non-existent. This was because the monastery did not cater to the teaching of any literature and the villagers believed it was no place for their children to learn any literature. Thus the children spent their childhood doing farm work. Before having their sons ordained as novices, the parents sent them to monastery for seven days to know by rote of the ritual texts of novitiation and of vinaya disciplinary rules. The new novices remained as such for seven days at the maximum. Therefore, monks had to personally go on alms-round on full moon, new moon and others sabbath days, because the villagers lived at their hillside farmland and returned home on those days only. The villagers have little time for religious endeavours for their constant struggle to earn a living. For the rest of the days village leaders and elders assigned some houses (5 or 6 houses per day) to be responsible for monks' alms-meal. On the assigned day the villagers concerned returned home from hillside farming, prepared a meal and took it to the monastery together with other offertories such as joss stick, candle, and cake. Moreover, the villagers offered some portions of their first crop and other offertories on full moon and new moon and other days of Buddhist significance. In this way regular securing of monk's meals and other consumable things went well. Reciprocally the monks gave sermons or recitals of protective verses at social ceremonies such as novitiation, house warming, child naming, funeral, etc. To enjoy such services, householders had to report their need in advance. The monks usually obliged their requests. Otherwise social contacts between monks and lay people were few. On this a 58-year-old Taungyoe man of Kyaunggone village said:

"In the past monks and villagers' contact happened only at donation ceremony, sabbath-keeping, or recital of protective verses. They were secluded from one another for the rest of the time."

After 2002, the locals, generally knowledgeable through contacts with surrounding regions, saw the need to learn literature. Scriptural instruction followed under the leadership of abbots. Among the monasteries, at Lower Waphyutaung village prayers and verses for recital book have been published (see Figure- 6) and those aged 14-20 are taught Dhammacakka discourse, morning-time instruction of scriptural literature to schoolchildren and evening-time instruction of schoolwork to the same (see Figure- 7). In novitiation, novices-to-be are required

to stay one month in advance at the monastery to properly learn the necessary scriptural texts and recital of Vinaya rules rather than the learning by rote of the recitals conducted by monks like in the past. In this way follows the parents' entrusting of their children with the monks for education and morals, overnight stay at the monastery of children at their parents' urging to do effective studies, and the taking up of the responsibility of doing monastic chores. Moreover, the novices remain as such much longer than before; novitiation in the Lenten period becomes more common; and villagers often get ordained as temporary monks during the Water Festival period (see Figure- 8). The number of the *sangha* has increased but the alms-food for them is no longer a problem because in addition to the donation of it by village houses those engaged in gold-related businesses nearby are also offering it.

The monks are now performing religious functions as well as social events, such self-appointed secular duties as sometime instruction of the villagers in morality and culturedness, joining village leaders and elders in giving leadership and advice to road building, and playing a leading role in solving some disputes arisen in the village. In this way the relationship between the monks and villagers grows fonder while its forms grow wider.

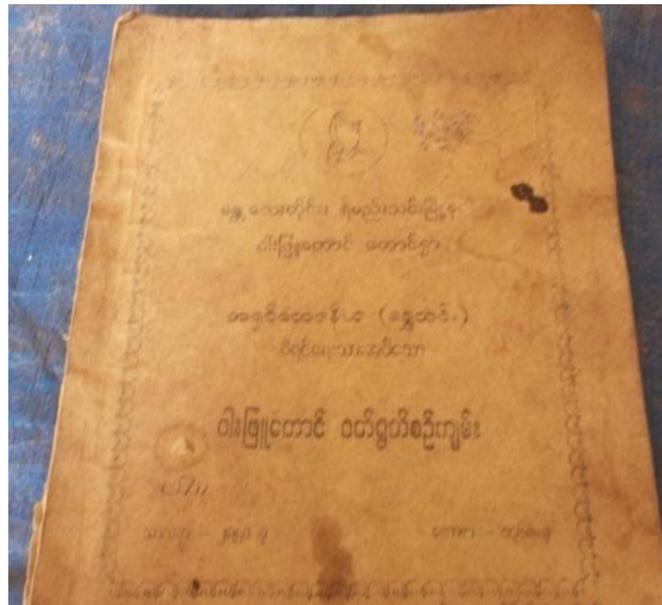


Figure- 6: The book titled a Set of Prayers and Verses in Lower Waphyutaung village



Figure- 7: Students study at the monastery



Figure- 8: Temporary monks during Water Festival period and novices ordained at the monastery

Discussion and Conclusion

Ember (1990) explained that all societies have possessed beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion. These beliefs vary from culture to culture and from year to year. Moreover, Hiebert (1983) stated that religious system, like other aspects of culture, is constantly changing in response to internal social pressures, environmental changes, and foreign ideas and control. Likewise, the Waphyudaung village tract is found, since ancient times to the present, to have been holding their belief in Buddhism. Their form of Buddhism includes pagoda building and its maintenance and repair, planting the sacred banyan tree, construction of monastery and its maintenance, and interrelations between the Sangha and villagers. Before 2002, all family members went to the monastery on days of religious significance, full moon and new moon days whether to keep sabbath or not; monasteries did not give any schooling, and villagers with a low opinion of education in benefitting their son

kept them as novices for a short time only and hence there were no permanent novices at the monasteries; after the premises of monk's discoursing popcorn is broadcast so as to have the attendees' affairs succeed. After 2002, less members of a family go to monastery to keep sabbath because some are engaged in carry service, running a vendor's stall, or are left behind to watch over the house; no broadcasting of popcorn after monk's preach is over; and novices stay longer than before at the monastery because the abbot and others are teaching them mundane and supramundane literature and cultured behaviour. The above-mentioned factors show that the *belief systems* have changed somewhat. Before 2002, locals went to the monastery for sabbath-keeping and when lay people sat to hear the monks' discourse at the monastery they did so in groups by age group and by gender. But after 2002, lay people sit together to hear monks discourse at the monastery, and the nationalities rarely wear respecter or the national costumes on visiting the monastery to keep Sabbath. These factors show *value systems* also have changed. Before 2002, monks delivered discourses and recited protective verses for villagers but rarely participated in social affairs. However, after 2002, monks participate in religious activities in association with village leaders and elders, and this shows behavior patterns have changed. Moreover before 2002, a monastery was built with plank flooring, plank walls and galvanized iron sheets for roofing; a monastic compound had a monastery standing alone; and the whole village tract had a pagoda only. But after 2002, brick monasteries have appeared; there are more pagodas in the village tract; and a monastic compound has an additional monastery for a single monk's use, a refectory, and a flagstaff. Therefore *religious buildings* have become varied and increased in number. Therefore it can be learned that the religious activities of Taungyo people's Buddhism and their traditional values systems, behavior patterns and customs have changed thanks to these adaptations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to Dr.Thida Htwe Win (Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Mandalay) for her insights and invaluable suggestion. Besides, I am deeply grateful to the locals of Waphyutaung village tract who answer my research questions and helped my data collection.

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