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| Title      | The role and functions of Mon traditional Sabbath food offering |
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# **The role and functions of Mon traditional sabbath food offering**

## **Abstract**

There are over one hundred ethnic groups in Myanmar and Mon national is one of them. Most of the Mon nationals settled around Bago (Hanthawaddi) Township in Bago Region, Mottama in Mon State and Pathein Township in Ayeyarwaddy Region. Among them, Hinthargon ward located in Bago Township was the primary settlement of Mon nationals among other living places of them. In this area, they lived together with other nationals such as Kayin and Bamar. They have been practising Buddhism from the days of their ancestors and have celebrated the religious folk festivals every year. Almost all the Mon nationals celebrate the traditional Sabbath Food Offering during the lent period. Traditional Sabbath Food Offering means the food and meals donation to Sabbath keepers who stay overnight at the monastery on Sabbath days. Most of the Mon youths perform in their respective roles and cooperate with each other in team spirit. A role is a part of function taken or assumed by any person or structure in a society. Roles are rooted in an individual's status, which often fixed and assigned. Because of the Mon parents, leaders and the presiding monks' training, the youths have come to experience that collaborating with one another leads to the unity of the Mon nationals and strengthen their social structure as ethnic identity. The objectives of the study are to elicit the Mon nationals' performance in their respective role; to find out the relationship between Mon traditional sabbath-food offering and ethnic identity. Ethnographic method or qualitative method was used to collect data. Informal Group Interview (IGI), Key Informant Interview (KII) and In-depth Interview were also conducted in this study. The study period was from 2010 to 2012. Recordings were done and photographs were taken to make the survey complete.

Key words: traditional Sabbath Food Offering, roles, team spirit, social structure, ethnic identity

## **Introduction**

All the nationals inhabit together within the Union of Myanmar and the Mon nationals settled around Bago (Hanthawaddi) Township in Bago Region, Mottama in Mon State and Pathein Township in Ayeyarwaddy Region. Among them, Hinthargon quarter which is located in Bago was the primary settlement of Mon national among other living places of them in Bago Township. In this area, they lived together with other nationals such as Kayin and Bamar. They have been practising Buddhism from the days of their ancestors and have celebrated the religious folk festivals every year. These religious folk festivals are made up of the community members' beliefs, values and norms which altogether constitute their ethnic identity. The famous festivals among the Mon nationals are in Waso (June-July), Wa-gaung (July-August), Tawthalin (August-September) during the Buddhist lent and Thidingyut (September-October) at the end of Lent. The Mon traditional sabbath food offering held during the lent period are explored in detail. In this activity, they perform their respective role and function. A role is a part of function taken or assumed by any person or structure in a society. Roles are rooted in an individual's status, which often fixed and assigned (Barfield, 1997).

The objectives of the study are to elicit the Mon nationals' performance in their respective role; to find out the relationship between Mon traditional sabbath-food offering and ethnic identity. Ethnographic method or qualitative method was used to collect data. Informal Group Interview (IGI), Key Informant Interview (KII) and In-depth Interview were also conducted in this study. The study period was from 2010 to 2012. Recordings were done and photographs were taken to make the survey complete.

## **Making merit of Mon nationals in the study area**

Almost all the Mons living in Hinthargon have built pagodas and monasteries for their religious belief. There are ten monasteries and eight pagodas at Hinthargon. They have deep conviction in performing meritorious deeds. On this a Mon grandmother living in Taung-htan roofed house said:

*“My husband is a farm land and we are poor. But we donate what we could while living from hand to mouth for the sake of next existence. With a little income we cook our daily food, a part of which is donated to three monks. On Sabbath day, we cook a good curry. With a special offertory*

*of food, we go to the monastery to receive Precepts from the presiding monk.”*

Another Mon grandmother, aged 76, added:

*“A Mon tradition in this area is, at dawn every morning, during the lent or outside of it, almost every household offers food to tanswan (alms-round of monks walking in single file). But I offer food to monks who go on alms-round and sit down a few minutes at host house. I also send a set of containers of alms-food to the monastery every month.”*

Most of the non-Mons also described that the priority of Mon nationals of Hinthargon being religious, enjoy donating and meritorious deeds. At Hinthargon a Mon household would offer alms-food to from at least three to fifty monks. On this a 50-year-old Bamar said:

*“In offering of alms-food some households have to cook about a pyi of rice. They offer cooked rice as well as curries. They raise bed before daybreak especially to cook rice for dawn alms-food of the monks. Only after that they cook for the family.”*

Concerning this case, an 80-year-old Bamar woman, a store-keeper living in Hinthargone, said:

*“The Mons are more committed to religious activities than Bamars. I notice they donate a lot. When a donation event is to take place at the monastery, they stop their business at home in order to contribute voluntary labour at the event. For example, a pony-cart driver would suspend his services for the day. As for myself, though I do donations sometimes I would not close the shop. But I have respect for their good work based on religious faith.”*

The above statements show they are devout generous Buddhists who are eager for merit-making. And this trait is found to be recognized by other nationals.

#### **Background history of Mon traditional Sabbath food offering**

According to the majority of the Mon nationals residing in Hinthargon, the month of Waso (June-July) is considered a holy month for the Buddhists. They offer monks robes and delicacies to the monks in the monastery of their patronage on the full moon day of Waso. Since the past times almost all the Mon youths make the traditional Sabbath Food Offering during the lent period. Traditional Sabbath Food Offering means the food and meals donation to Sabbath keepers who stay overnight at the monastery on Sabbath days. It is prepared by the Mon youths themselves. A 78-year-old Mon leader said:

*“Since my youth, I had been a leader of Sabbath-day food offering team. Now young people have taken over. As a youth of thirteen, I saw older persons contributing labour and always realized I must take such responsibility one day. Boys and girls of about that age were in membership.”*

The above fact highlights that Mon nationals' Sabbath food offering teams developed over 70 years and these offering teams depend on age. This activity has been carried out at all monasteries where the Mons keep the Sabbath. It has since become as a Mon traditional custom.

Most Mon youths form themselves into groups or teams and give labor contribution to them. Most of the Mon national said that the groups are formed according to the monastery they would be sending the meals, and send the alms-food to the monastery of their choice. Some join the team for religious reasons and some choose to join to be together with their close friends. Some groups are formed entirely with a group of friends for social purposes. An 18-year-old female member of a team, living in *Mon Sanpya* one Street said:

*“Teams are based on monasteries and their number is in propitiation to donors. My mother is from Khaya village (Hpa-an Township, Kayin State). All the Mons who moved from Khaya patronize Pun Htaw monastery. I have enlisted in Khaya team in Mon Sanpya eight Street my friends belong to it.”*

The above statement shows that these associations aim the Mon youths to participate in doing merit and the youths also have a sense of merit.

The team members stick close together not only through the lent period but on other religious and social occasions such as the Robe Offering (*Kahtein*), wedding receptions and novitiation ceremonies and funerals. If there be any need for assistance at the house of a member, such as weddings or funerals, they would all go and lend a hand. A young Mon leader, aged 24, said:

*“After the lent period is over, team members also help out in a team member’s social event auspicious or not, like a funeral, novitiation, ordination, or a wedding. For the Kahtein (Robe Offering) celebrating at monasteries each team collects money for an offering of delicacies. No outside voluntary labour is needed now. Each monastery has its own donors and helpers.”*

This statement describes that all the Mon youths eagerly participate in their respective teams and the social networks not support for the unity of all members of their respective group also all the Mon nationals.

The team members would be familiar with all the activities of the team since they were young. Thus they have a chance for the choice of a life partner appears more likely. A team leader added:

*“We have to give service. If not, the Mon tradition will waste away. Elders before us have taught and pulled us along. Now is our turn for leadership.”*

This statement describes that most of the Mon national living in Hinthagone usually participated in young life and take the respective responsibilities regarding the Sabbath-food offering. It can be said that they have a self-concept on their identity and their social network depends on age.

Most of the members of the Mon youth said that there are no hard and fast rules or regulations, requiring compulsory membership from all the youth. All the Mon youth in a household, regardless of the number, could join the teams. However, if a family cannot afford to let all children join the teams, they have to give priority to younger ones. Those who cannot join would have to help the younger children with whatever that is needed for the activity instead.

Some young members explained that some youths, though willing to join the groups, cannot afford membership fees. In such a situation, a rich, generous family forms a team comprising such youths at its own expense whereat they need not pay membership fees. Then that team goes out soliciting donations, which is then used for holding Sabbath food offering. A shortfall in the fund needed is remained by the donor. Such a donor said:

*“I have organized a team, including my son. I would like to see youths standing by without joining a team because they cannot afford membership fees. I see to it that at least a youth from every household is included in a team. In this way, their wish is fulfilled and the Mon tradition is kept alive.”*

It can be said that the donors want to maintain their traditional customs so that they support to the needs of Mon youths.

There would be altogether 25 to 30 members each in most teams. The minority of them has about 50 members of each. It is because the strength of the team is decided on so as to acquire funds to donate a *Padaetharpin*. Team members select two leaders, one male and one female, from among them. Normally the leaders would be those who have good relationships with all team members. Membership fees for the teams pay the due amount in installments or as convenient. For example, if the required amount is 12,000 kyats (2011), they could pay 1000 kyats a week for twelve weeks, or they could pay in installments. A female team member said:

*“Our team has a membership of about thirty; the team’s quotas were 1, 2000 kyat (2011) and 1, 0000 kyat (2010). I contribute in five installments, but it takes longer when I have many payments to be made. We go on alms-round weekly, and remainder-money is held by the two leaders by turns.”*

Depending on the number of food offering groups, various tasks are assigned among them. A male team member said:

*“There are three similar teams for Alae Mon monastery-two of young people and one of older people. Tasks are taken up by turns: a group may cook rice and another may cook one week and vice versa the following weeks”.*

#### **Going on collection rounds of Mon youths**

Team members meet after 12:00 noon on every Sabbath day and go round the ward to collect donations (Figure 4). All houses contribute either cash or rice to the teams. The households, even though they have to make contributions every week, would not complain since the donation is not possible for just one family and because it is a joint contribution by all concerned. For families or households where there is no youth to spare due to the demanding household duties, they have to offer extra cash donations.



(Figure 4) Youths on alms-round to solicit resources for preparation of Sabbath food

It is not compulsory for all team members to go for collection rounds. If there are anything important he or she must attend to, the absence is understood. However, they must make their appearance of their own free conscience in the following weeks. A 16-year-old team member boy said:

*“I work at a goldsmith’s shop and can do this religious chore only every other week. All other members sympathize with my circumstances.”*

The above facts highlight that though the members are young they have mutual understanding to each other.

#### **Preparation of Mon traditional Sabbath food**

All the members of the Mon youth said that the weekly collection from the donors plus the general fund is used for the preparation of the meals. Depending on the amount of donations, they would prepare rice broth, *mo-hin-ga* (မုန့်ဟင်းခါး), fried noodles, fried

vermicelli, *yew-kyar-kwei* (အိကြာကွေး), tea and so on. They need to prepare more when there are a lot of Sabbath keepers on full-moon and dark-moon days. The surplus cash is set aside for the *Padaetharpin* Festival held on the day after the Full Moon Day of *Thadingyut*. A youthful member said:

*“At the starts of lent period, peoples tend to be more generous so we receive a lot of offerings. Some rice is sold off to whoever is willing to buy. The proceeds are used to prepare Sabbath meal. Expenses depend on the number of Sabbath keepers. Our monastery caters for about 25 of them, costing us about kyat 1, 5000 a week. Yet we are left with a surplus of kyat 2, 000-3, 000.”*

According to the account of most of the Mon youths, they would gather at a particular house to prepare food for the Sabbath keepers every Sabbath day. Some groups choose the house of a team member with the permission of the parents of that household. Some find out a suitable place with the help of a friend. The place needs to be spacious enough for the cooking activities. Sometimes, especially at the *Padaetharpin* (Holding ceremonial round of tree shaped stand where various articles of offering are hung) Festival during *Thidingyut*, there would be so much fun and merry-making that the owners need to be able to tolerate the noise.

Team members gather at the chosen place or house and make preparations in the evening of the pre-Sabbath day. A team leader said:

*“One pre-Sabbath day night, the volunteers need a house virtually at their disposal, what with their prospective boisterousness, preparation of a Padaetharpin, hosting guests, and playing tapes. They need spacious quarters, like a whole floor of the house. If rice broth is to be made, preparations were made on the night before, like, picking out grains of husked paddy out of the rice”.*

Since they have to get up at 3:00 am the next morning to start cooking, they sleep overnight at the place. The youth normally stay up all night after the preparation work is done. To fight sleepiness, they play video tapes and Parcel game. They can afford about one hour of sleep only but are very happy. The leader has to supervise his team members.

Parents trust their children and allow them to do so. The youth also try to be worthy of the trust, and treat other team members as their own brother or sister. All the Mon youth of Hinthargon said that they not only get religious merit from the good deed, but they also get much pleasure out of it.

Sometimes, the teams would prepare food or snacks for themselves at that night. They also invite other teams to eat with them. For instance, if a team prepared snacks at a particular meet, they would go out to other teams around 10:00 pm that evening to invite other teams to join them. This interaction among the different teams promotes good relationships. In this way the kindred spirit is bred in them since young.

Early the next morning, the cooked meal would be carried to the respective monastery and the food offered to the monks and the Sabbath keepers. When the meal is finished and the washing up activities are done, the presiding abbot of the monastery would give the youth a sermon and preach them to preserve the national culture, arts and literature and to hold the Triple Gems (ရတနာသုံးပါး/ Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) in reverence at all times. Another team member said:

*“After the devotees have had their meal and doing dishes has been finished, the presiding abbot administers the precepts. Then he also admonishes how to keep Mon traditions alive, like, to choose a Mon as life partner, to always use Mon language at home, to greet one another in Mon language on the road, and to learn saying of prayers in Mon language.”*

This fact shows that the monks himself encourage the youths to maintain their ethnic identity.

### **Discussion**

Members of the society interact a network of social relations ordered and patterned according to prevailing customs (Cited in Thidar Htwe Win, 2015). They share their knowledge and customs with each other in their social network. In addition, the structure of the society and the behaviours of tis members can also be found within its social networks (ibid). Similarly, in this study, Mon national living in Hinthargon demonstrates their distinctive customs through their Mon traditional Sabbath-food offering as social network. In this social network, their traditional customs can be found. From the above factors, the social institutions of its society can be seen in their social structure.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows the elders' activities tend towards the Supramundane (လောကုတ္တရာ) while young people try to fulfill their needs. In their traditional Sabbath-food offering, most Mon parents and leaders fulfill whatever necessary needs and train to have the youths always instilled with self-concept that their Mon traditions must be kept alive and to cooperate with each other. Moreover, the Mon presiding monks also admonish to maintain Mon traditional customs. For these circumstances the Hinthagone-dwelling Mons are able to maintain their Mon traditions to date.

In cooperating with each other, most of the Mon youth not only have a chance to meet each other well but also have come to know the spirit of togetherness. It promotes closeness among the youth, enhances religious faith in them, and perpetuates the unity among the Mons. Thus they benefit materially and spiritually. It is said that the social network is very important not only for maintaining Mon identity but also for the unity of the Mon national in Hinthargon.

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