THE MYTHS OF THE BUDDHA'S RELICS OF THE TAI PEOPLE: REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND INDIGENOUS BELIEFS¹

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs that are evident in the Tai myths of the Buddha's relics. From the analysis of the characters and their symbolic behaviour, we can see that the religious beliefs of the Tai people were very complex. The relationship between religious beliefs shown in the myths of the Tai people shows various characteristics and can be categorized into three groups: first, the conflict between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs; second, the integration of indigenous beliefs into Buddhism; and third, the integration of Buddhism into indigenous beliefs. The kind of relationship that occurs in each group is due to the variety of aspects of these beliefs that co-

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exist. The conflict between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs is reflected in the myth's plot, motif and character behaviour, which is due to the conflicting behaviour of the two completely opposite belief systems in the myths. The acceptance of each offer between the two belief systems is reflected in certain sets of motifs and character behaviour. The study of the integration of the two belief systems shows the development of the mythical characters and their behaviour, thus reflecting the religious thoughts and beliefs of the Tai people.

Introduction

The integration of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs has been evident in Thai culture since long ago, be it in the form of architecture, mural art, customs and rituals as well as myths, beliefs and religion. Various forms of the culture reflect the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs and the complexity of two religious systems. Thus, it can be seen that the majority of Thai people are Buddhist whilst continuing to adhere to their indigenous beliefs.

Scholars in the field of Thai studies generally agree that the religious system of the Tai people is a mixture of indigenous beliefs and Buddhism. Thomas Kirsch (1977) addressed the complexity of the Thai religious system in his article entitled "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation". He stated that indigenous beliefs have effectively been swallowed up by Buddhism, this despite the difference between Buddhism and these once popular beliefs. This is in agreement with the view of Charles Keyes (1987: 35), who observes that despite following Buddhism, the Thai people have not dismissed their indigenous beliefs in spirits, supernatural forces and charms. Thus, even though the Tai people regard Buddhism as their main religion, this is

not their only religion, as non-Buddhist beliefs are blended into their belief structure.

Myths, beliefs and rituals are forms of cultural evidence used to highlight the characteristic relationship between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs that have been preserved throughout time. The myths of the Buddha's relics illustrate the influence of Buddhist religious sites upon the widespread thoughts and beliefs of the Tai people both inside and outside Thailand.

By considering the contents of the Tai myth of the Buddha's relics, the author found that despite the differing characteristics of the indigenous beliefs and Buddhism, they can co-exist. Even though the content is generally related to Buddhism, the myth of the Buddha's relics indicates many aspects of the stories that are not related to Buddhism, such as those concerning spirits, ogres, mythical serpents and local people. Furthermore, the behaviour featured in those dramas is also evident in a form of cannibalism, fighting with the Buddha, the destruction of the Buddha's stupa and a show of miraculous powers.

These characteristics provoke the question: Why are there traces of non-acceptance towards Buddhism present in the myth of the Buddha's relics?. Also, other questions, such as What is the myth trying to say and how are the various beliefs related? may be raised. If we assume that myth and ritual are a special language that man uses to convey certain messages to future generations, it can then be stated that myth is a form of communication for mankind (G.S. Kirk, 1970: 42, Claude Levi-Strauss, 1969: 210-211) and can portray cultural meaning (Roland Barthes, 1996: 3-5). This is particularly so for stories relating to religious belief since myths are closely

related to beliefs in sacred and supernatural power, as stated by Siraporn Nathalang (2002: 190):

...Myth is a kind of folklore that is regarded as a sacred narrative. Myth generally refers to God, deities and those possessing supernatural powers and is usually used to explain the origin of the world and the origins of our various cultures. Sociologists such as Malinowski, Leach and Kluckhohn believe that myth and ritual are interrelated. Myth explains our origins and provides the reasoning behind rituals, myth thus relates to religious belief, sacred things or beliefs in supernatural forces in a given society. Therefore, we are able to analyze religious beliefs in a society from the content of the myth.

This article then intends to analyse the inter-relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs that are reflected in the Tai myths of the Buddha's relics,³ particularly motifs and character behavior.

The analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs reflected in the myth of the Buddha's relics will help us see and understand the reasons for the co-existence between different religious beliefs and the characteristics of the relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs.

The author used 105 stories of the myth of the Buddha's relics known amongst the

³ The information portrayed in the Tai myths of the Buddha's relics and applied to the author's analysis and discussion in this article is only partial and not complete. Further information can be obtained in the author's full dissertation.

ethnic groups of Thailand, such as the Tai Yai, Tai Lue, Tai Khoen, and the Laos-Thai in the north, and the Thais of the northeast, central and southern regions. The author categorised the relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs in the myth of the Buddha's relics into 3 groups: first, conflict between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs, second, integration of the indigenous beliefs into Buddhism, and third, integration of Buddhism into the indigenous beliefs.

Conflict between Buddhism and Indigenous beliefs

The content of certain myths of the Buddha's relics of the Tai people who are Buddhist reflects signs of conflict between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs, showing characteristics of "binary opposition", that is the content of the myth showing a conflicting relationship between the two belief systems. The author will show two examples of such an opposing relationship: first, the Buddha – spirits; and second, acceptance – conflict.

Conflict between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs arose when a new belief was indoctrinated into existing beliefs, thus there a conflict between characters representing Buddhism and those in local religion. The myth content refers to the non-acceptance of the local people towards Buddha and thus portrays the Buddha displaying his almighty power in order to gain acceptance and respect, (such as in the following examples).

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Jom Thong* (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมทอง-Chiang Rung).

The Buddha travels to earth to the city of *Alawii*. Upon his visit he

encounters ogres waiting to catch humans, the ogre thus attempts to catch and eat the Buddha.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Don Tao*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอนเต้า-Lampang).

Many ogres fight with the Buddha, the Buddha exerting his miraculous powers in the form of heavy rain, the ogres becoming fearful of his power.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Yuak*, (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกยหวก-Payao).

The Buddha encounters the mythical serpent known as *Phayanaak*. The mythical serpent thinks that the Buddha is the mythical bird known as *Phayakrut*, who is his enemy so *Phayanaak* flees into a tunnel.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Bua Bok*, (ตำนานพระธาตุบัวบก-Udon Thani)

The Buddha travels to *Kuuvian* Mountain and fights with the golden serpent known as *Phayasuvannaak* who is the owner of the territory.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Phanom*, (ตำนานพระธาตุพนม-Nakon Phanom).

The Buddha travels to *Kampra* Mountain on the edge of the Mekhong River and sights a group of ghosts living there. When the ghosts see the Buddha they run away in fear and flee into the Mekhong River, hiding in the *Lii Pii* rapids.

The apparent behaviour in these myths, regardless of whether catching, fighting or fleeing from the Buddha, shows the resistance towards Buddha and his status as representative of the belief in Buddhism. However, the author found that despite the resistance shown in the myth and the conflict between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism,

Buddhism was eventually victorious and accepted by the local people. The concept of conflict later giving way to acceptance can be found in many Tai myths, such as the myth of *Phayakhankaak* telling the story of the reincarnation of Buddha as *Phayakhankaak* and his defeat over *Phayathaen*, thus leading to the acceptance of *Phayakhankaak*. The myth of *Yakhwankhaow*, rice Goddess, tells the story of the struggle of power between the Buddha and *Yakhwankhaow* and their eventual acceptance of mutual power. These characteristics show signs of non-acceptance towards Buddhism and conflicting behaviour between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs represented in the myths.

The success of these mythical structures lies in the creation of scenes with the local people becoming “bad people” and the Buddha simultaneously becoming “the star” and able to successfully be victorious over the indigenous beliefs of the local people. These stories created a hero figure in the Buddha and enabled the conflict between the local people to subside and the word of the Buddha to be widespread. This was a direct development in belief, a direct shift from the indigenous beliefs to a belief in Buddhism, forming new boundaries for the beliefs and religion of the Tai people who tried to adopt this new belief as a mark of being Thai Buddhists.

The binary relationship between acceptance and conflict became a two-way thought struggle and was a conflicting problem for the Tai people. Siraporn Nathalang's (2548: 293) observation was related to a most interesting issue relevant to the conflict between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, that being, “The doubt in the hearts of the Thai - Tai people relates to a choice of religion, i.e. should they follow indigenous beliefs or Buddhism. In other words, who

should they worship between Buddha and the local spirits?” At this point we should bear in mind that the Tai people believed that disaster or some form of natural disaster would strike if they did not pay respect to the local spirits.

The early myths generally portray a conflict between the two belief systems and show the fear of the power and presence of the Buddha by the local people, ogres, mythical serpent and spirits. This fear caused the local people to dislike the Buddha, and their actions of avoidance, resistance and lack of assistance showed the local people's lack of acceptance towards this new belief at that time.

Analysis of the characters appearing in the Tai myths of the Buddha's relics showed that certain characters are representatives of the supernatural forces involved with the indigenous beliefs, such as spirits, the mythical serpent and ogres, while others are representatives of the tribes of this region, such as the Lua, Mon and Karen and also representatives of Buddhism such as the Buddha, *Indra*, deities, *Asoka*.

The behaviour of the characters in the myths, such as hunting the Buddha for food, chasing away the Buddha and not giving the Buddha food and water, were all behavioural patterns of resistance by the local people towards the Buddha. This behaviour later changed after the acceptance of the Buddha by the local people, the local people paying respects to the Buddha, making donations of food and water to the Buddha, taking care of the Buddha and asking for hair relics.

These aforementioned characteristics highlight the extended influence of Buddhism in the region of the Tai people, the extension of Buddhism as a slow and inconsistent process. Some areas were immediately able to accept the influence of

Buddhism, whereas some areas were not accepting of Buddhism due to strong belief and widespread faith in indigenous beliefs.

It has been observed that the ogre known as *Alawaka* appearing in the myth of the Tai Lue people also appears in the *Tripitaka*, the Buddhist scriptures, regarded as the main text of the teachings of the Buddha to be used in the guidance for beliefs and practices in Buddhist society. In the *Tripitaka* (1996: 351-354) it is written that the Buddha sufficiently answered the ogre *Alawaka*'s queries relating to Dhamma such that the ogre accepted the Dhamma and teachings of the Buddha. Previously the ogre *Alawaka* was without reasoning, showing depravity and using aggressive force in solving problems. After listening to the teachings of the Buddha *Alawaka* adopted Buddhist morals. These characteristics show the truth of one aspect of Buddhism, that a code of ethics and morality may be a determining factor in the change from one type of person into another. The previously sinful and deprave ogre became a moral being and was able to rid itself of depravity and desire.

Many Tai myths continue to portray the worship and belief in deities and sacred objects as were ever present in their indigenous beliefs. Known as polytheism, there are spirits of the sky, water, mountain, earth, town and house as well as deities and sacred objects. After the widespread acceptance of Buddhism, efforts were made to spiritually develop the Tai people to believe in only one deity of the highest order, monotheism. That deity was to be the Buddha. This signifies the efforts made to create the understanding that the Buddha is the one and only sacred being for the Tai people to worship.

As stated above, we can see that the conflict between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism

were recorded in the myths of the Buddha's relics so as to inform future generations and create awareness and understanding as to the past of the Tai people. To this day the Tai people are Buddhist but in the past they may have believed that Buddhism was from another place, alien and far removed from their indigenous beliefs. This led to conflict, denial and rejection of Buddhist concepts until the eventual acceptance of Buddhism. In relation to the conflict between these two differing beliefs, Siraporn Nathalang (2005: 309-310) has researched and studied many Tai myths and concludes that the important point that the Tai forefathers are trying to tell future generations is that of the system of religious belief of the Tai people.

...In the traditional society of the Thai – Tai there was conflict in the system of belief, between the indigenous beliefs and supernatural forces and the Buddhist belief that was accepted by the ruling classes. The belief of Buddhism eventually became part of the daily lifestyle of the local people in conjunction with the supernatural forces thus leading to a battle between the two beliefs. Thus a choice was to be made between Buddhism and the Lord Buddha in his many forms or the indigenous beliefs relating to mythical serpents, ogres and various spirits. Eventually, what happened in Thai – Tai society was that there was a combination of the two beliefs, the indigenous beliefs generally giving way to Buddhism.

Integration of the Indigenous Beliefs into Buddhism

Another group of myths portrays the attempt of Buddhism to adjust itself to the indigenous beliefs as "Folk Buddhism."

That is, the Buddhist myths show acceptance of the role of indigenous beliefs, particularly in their fertility function as shown below.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Noi*,
(ตำนานพระธาตุคอกน้อย-Chiang Mai)

The Buddha allowed *Phayanaak* and *Indra* to watch over the relics of the Buddha. When people came to pray and pay their respects and request water, *Phayanaak* would call for rain to fall.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Jae Wo*,
(ตำนานพระธาตุเจ้าหัว-Payao)

The Buddha and his disciples came upon *Phayanaak* on their travels. After eating their food and realising they had no water, the Buddha allowed his disciples to request water from *Phayanaak*.

The above examples of the myths show that Buddhism accepts the fertility role of the indigenous beliefs and supernatural forces. For example, the call for water and bounty from *Phayanaak* reflects upon the acceptance of the power of *Phayanaak*, *Phayanaak* symbolic of the original beliefs and something already long sacred to the Tai people. *Phayanaak* possessed the ability and power to call for rain and was regarded as the deity of water. Thus *Phayanaak* was related to water and bounty in the indigenous beliefs of the Tai, be it rain, rivers, streams, lakes, ponds or swamps. This can be seen in the myths of *Suwannakhomkham* and *Prathatphanom*, both referring to the role of *Phayanaak* in the origin of the Mekhong River, *Phayanaak* said to have "pulled out the earth" until the river was born. This is similar to the myth of *Phadaeng Naang Ai* (Northeastern region), the myth stating that two mythical naga or *Phayanaak* were

responsible for creating the Mekhong River and the Naan River.

Other than this, the author also found that other myths tried to explain that if people came to worship and take care of the Buddha's relics, rain would fall and create a bountiful land for the people of the region. The myth of *Saen Hai*, (ตำนานพระธาตุแสนไห-Chiang Mai) tells that when the local people came to pay respect and clean the Buddha's relics, the power of the relics would protect the people and also call for rain at the appropriate time. There would be plentiful rice, fish and food, similar to the myth of *Don Tao*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอนเต้า-Lampang), which tells that the land was arid and the people were poor due to their negligence of the Buddha's relics. Later, when taking good care of the relics, the lands became arable with plentiful rice harvests. These characteristics show the thinking behind the acceptance of the indigenous beliefs, that being, a symbol of Buddhism was taken and applied to a new role in accordance with the tradition and culture of the Tai people. Now the Buddha's relics could call for rains, as could *Phayanaak* in indigenous belief. This shows the Buddha's acceptance of sacred objects and the people's widespread belief in *Phayanaak* and its worldly powers.

The myth of *Doi Yuak*, (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกยวัก-Payao) tells the story of the Buddha on his travels to Doi Yuak and his encounter with *Phayanaak*. Upon seeing the Buddha, *Phayanaak* became very frightened, thinking the Buddha a mythical bird known as *Payakrut*. *Phayanaak* thus fled and hid in a tunnel. The Buddha later came to apologise for scaring *Phayanaak* and from that moment the Buddha was able to ask *Phayanaak* for water. This shows the Buddha's acceptance of the power of *Phayanaak* in providing water. The acceptance of the Buddhist concept towards

the indigenous beliefs is also evident in other Tai stories, such as the myth of *Yakhwankhaow* (ตำนานย่าขวัญข้าว-Tai Lue), which tells of the Buddha following *Yakhwankhaow* back to earth as she was the mother of crops that the Buddha could not create. The Buddha instructed the people to worship *Yakhwankhaow* (Siraporn Na Thalang, 2545: 117-118). Thus, both *Yakhwankhaow* and *Phayanaak* played important roles as deities in the indigenous beliefs of the Tai people. Therefore, in the process of adjusting Buddhism to be "popular Buddhism," the deities, once of a completely separate belief, were accepted into the system of Buddhism.

Other than the call for rain and bountiful harvests, the author also found myths explaining the Buddha's acceptance of indigenous beliefs and his extraordinary powers. Not only could the Buddha predict the future but it was told that his relics were also able to cure disease and illness, produce fine crops and preserve peace for the people. For example:

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Khaam Kaen*, (ตำนานพระธาตุขามแก่น-Khon Kaen).
Upon placing the relics of the Buddha on a dead tree, the tree was brought back to life and grew to great beauty.
- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Tung* (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยตุง-Chiang Rai).
The Buddha predicted that the region he was visiting would become a civilised kingdom of Buddhism and would be forever protected.
- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Don Tao*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอนเต้า-Lampang).
The local people believed that by taking care of the Buddha's relics the kingdom would remain strong and be

without war; similarly, by neglecting the Buddha's relics the kingdom would experience great hardship.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Dinjii*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยคินจี-Tak).

The site of the Buddha's relics would have sacred water constantly flowing, the water created by the power of the relics. It was believed that this sacred water could cure disease and illness.

The above examples all show the changing role of Buddhism one similar to that of the indigenous beliefs. Furthermore, the myth of *Jom Kham*, (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมคำ-Tai Khoen) tells of the Buddha travelling to Nong Tung and his encounter with *Nang Naakmali*, the protective spirit of the town of Chiang Tung. The Buddha gave a hair relic to *Nang Naakmali* so that she could give it to the sage who was to build the city. This shows the reliance of the Buddha upon *Nang Naakmali* as a medium in passing the Buddha's relics onto the local people, as *Nang Naakmali* was the representative of the local beliefs and a highly respected protective spirit of the city. This indicates the Buddha's realisation of the sacred nature of *Nang Naakmali* to the local people and the need to depend upon her to initiate the Buddha's relics into the community much more smoothly.

Not only was *Phayanaak* highly respected, but so were the ogres and sacred spirits, which were also feared. The myth of *Jom Thong*, (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมทอง-Chiang Rung) tells about the fear of *Alawii*, the ruler of Chiang Rung, towards the ogre *Alawaka* and the sending of human sacrifices to appease the ogre. The myth of *Prabaht Rangrung*, (ตำนานพระธาตุพระบาทรังรุ้ง-Tai Yai) tells about *Phayanaak*, ogres and deities dedicating themselves to the upkeep of the Buddha's relics. The myth of *Phanom*,

(ตำนานพระธาตุพนม-Nakorn Phanom) tells about the travel of the Buddha to the region of *Kampra* Mountain, the original home of *Phayanaak*, spirits and many ogres. The Buddha brought his hair relic to be enshrined and the aforementioned took care of the relics. The vision of *Phayanaak*, spirits and ogres assisting the Buddha is testament of the efforts of Buddhism in adapting itself to the role of indigenous beliefs that were present in the Tai communities. The eventual creation of a Buddhist community reflects upon the power of things sacred that were still so influential to the Tai people, these sacred things later attributed as part of the Buddhist belief.

Some myths tell about the change of the Buddha into a regular man so as not to create the impression that Buddhism was so far removed from the people and also to seem more connected to the original beliefs. This is another indication of the acceptance of Buddhism towards the indigenous beliefs as shown in the myth of *Doi Tung*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยตุง -Chiang Rai) which tells about the reincarnation of *Prayasinghanawatiraach* as the Buddha and his travels to the mountain *Kichakut*. The myth of *Bua Bok*, (ตำนานพระธาตุบัวบก-Udon Thani) states that in a former life the Buddha was once *Phayasuwan-naak*, a dweller of the region of *Nong Haan Luang*.

Other than the human myths foretold, there are many other stories relating to original ethnic groups such as the Lua, who had never previously accepted Buddhism and were later converted to Buddhism. The Lua have been responsible for the spread of Buddhism throughout the Tai communities to this very day. The myth of *Chedi Luang*, (ตำนานพระธาตุเจดีย์หลวง -Chiang Mai) tells about the Lua ancestors and their presence in the region long before the Tai and also tells of

the construction of Wat Chedi Luang (Peter Kunstadter, 1965: 1-2). Similarly, the myth of *Doi Kham*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยคำ -Chiang Mai) relates the story of two great ancestors of the Lua, *Pu sae* and *Yaa Sae*, and their care for the Buddha's relics, the promotion of Buddhism throughout Lanna and the bountiful harvests. Simultaneously, the myth of *Jom Doi*, (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมดอย -Chiang Tung) tells about the Lua ancestors and their construction of Jom Doi temple for the Tai people to pay their respect to the Buddha.

The article entitled "The Cosmology of Power in Lanna" (Michael R. Rhum, 1987: 99) studies the myth of *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae* (ตำนานปู่และย่าแสนะ), the content very similar to that in the myth of *Doi Kham*, (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยคำ- Chiang Mai). The article shows that the worship of the Buddha as one with almighty power is tantamount to the worship of the spirits of *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae*. In this myth *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae* are regarded as the founders of "nature" or representatives of nature as they are spirits living in the mountain forest. Eventually, *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae* became representative of Buddhism as guardians of the Buddha's relics. Traces of these thoughts reflect upon the development of the thinking of Tai Buddhists, that is the development of worshipping supernatural forces to a more traditional way of thinking and the worship of Buddha.

Thus, *Phayanaak*, ogres, spirits and the Lua are representatives of the indigenous beliefs or the supernatural forces involved in the protection of the people and the land. At the same time, these characters can create trouble and danger and are thus highly regarded by the Tai people, regardless of their new association with Buddhism. The many myths mentioned above create a

picture of these sacred things being accepted as a part of Buddhism and used as guardians of the Buddha's relics. Buddhism thus allows these protective supernatural forces that appear in indigenous beliefs. The efforts by the Tai people to strengthen the worship of these indigenous beliefs under the belief of Buddhism are an interesting indication of the important role of the indigenous beliefs and their influence upon the lifestyle of the Tai people.

Integration of Buddhism into the Indigenous Beliefs

Another group of myths reflect efforts to integrate the indigenous beliefs with the power of Buddhism. This group of myths applies Buddhist behaviour to the characters of the indigenous beliefs, be it making merit, entering the monkhood, paying respect or following the path of Buddhism. This shows the combination of the two belief systems as one, that being, "the spirits and the Buddha", known as syncretism. These myths often give the picture of the local people as caretakers of the Buddha's relics, supporters of the construction of religious buildings. The local people eventually then follow the path of Buddhism, as shown in the examples below.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Tung*.

(ตำนานพระธาตุดอยตุง-Chiang Rai).

The Buddha travelled through the air with his alms bowl to the house of the Lua chief known as *Pu Jao Laojok*. The chief placed food in the alms bowl and the Buddha gave a sermon.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Tham Nomphe*.

(ตำนานพระธาตุถ้ำนัมผา-Chiang Mai).

Phayanaak and the protective spirits brought fruit and honey to the Buddha, the Buddha thus gave a hair relic to *Phayanaak* and the protective spirits and ordered them to take care of the relics.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Doi Suthep*.

(ตำนานพระธาตุดอยสุเทพ-Chiang Mai)

Pu Sae and *Yaa Sae* gave up eating human meat and followed the path of Buddhism, their children being ordained as monks.

- The myth of the Buddha's relics, *Jom Thong*.

(ตำนานพระธาตุจอมทอง-Chiang Rung)

The Buddha travelled to the kingdom of *Alawii* and found the ogre *Alawaka* waiting to catch and eat humans. The Buddha gave a sermon to the ogre and asked it to cease the consumption of human meat and follow the path of Buddhism. The ogre took out his fangs and the Buddha gave the ogre a hair relic and asked the ogre to build a stupa to keep the relics.

The behaviour of making merit, offering donations, entering the monkhood and refraining from killing were an "upgrade" in the level of ethics for the characters of the indigenous beliefs. The Buddhist-like behaviour was symbolic of the behavioural change from "evil to good", from "incomplete to complete". It showed development of thinking and the principles of Buddhism as a learning process of the Buddha's teachings. The myths of the Tai people thus reflect the behavioural changes of the characters representing indigenous beliefs.

The offerings to the Buddha by the local people in the myths were usually fruit and vegetables. For example, the myth of *Chaw*

Hae, (ตำนานพระธาตุห่อแฮ-Prae) telling of the Lua ruler *Ay Khom* making offerings of betel nut to the Buddha. The myth of *Doi Tung*, (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกช้าง-Chiang Rai) says that *Pu* and *Yaa Jao Laojok* made offerings of rice and fruit, and in the myth of *Jom Kaeng*, (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมแกง-Chiang Mai), a village head made offerings of vegetable curry and rice to the Buddha and his disciples. It can be observed that at the beginning of the myth the offerings were made to the Buddha due to his great power and presence, but later on in the story, the people brought food and fruit to the Buddha not as a representative of Buddhism but because they respected the Buddha as somebody with extraordinary power. This characteristic is in accordance with the indigenous worship patterns of the local people, that they usually offer food to spirits and supernatural forces.

If we consider the offerings made to the Buddha, it can be seen that the offerings were mainly vegetarian, in contrast to the offerings made to the ogres and spirits, which were usually raw meat. For example, the myth of *Jom Thong*, (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมทอง-Tai Lue) tells about the ruler of *Alawii* placing a sacrificial virgin into the hands of the ogre for his consumption. The myths of *Doi Suthep* (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกสุเทพ - Chiang Mai) and *Doi Kham* (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกคำ - Chiang Mai) both tell about the sacrificial slaughter made to *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae*. Thus we can see the complete change in the behaviour between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism, from “*himsa*” to “*ahimsa*”, meaning not hurting any other party in accordance with Buddhist ethics, which is in “binary opposition” to the indigenous beliefs and the ritual sacrifice required for the peace and prosperity of the lives and communities of the local people.

It has also been observed that the myth of *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae* shows their inability to refrain from killing animals and the consumption of meat. Thus, they asked the Buddha’s permission that once a year, the local people could make offerings of animal meat to them instead of human sacrifice. This is another reflection upon the antagonism towards Buddhism that regardless of *Pu Sae* and *Yaa Sae* becoming guardians of the relics, they still continued their original ritual practice of slaying animals. This shows the binary opposition between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism that appear in these two myths.

In the beginning of several myths, it is often stated that the Buddha and his disciples traveled through the air in order to bring peace to the land of the Tai. For example, the myth of *Yang Hae* (ตำนานพระธาตุยางแฮ-Chiang Rai) tells that the Buddha traveled and encountered *Phayanaak*, and the myth of *Phanom* (ตำนานพระธาตุพนม-Nakon Phanom) that the Buddha traveled through the air to a hill near *Nong Khan Tae Sua Nam* (หนองคันแทเสื้อน้ำ). The Buddha’s flight to the land of the Tai people is an indication of the presence and power of the Buddha’s supernatural forces. Many of the myths tell about the Buddha attaining enlightenment and walking through the air to the Land of the Tai, and then he would show his power to suppress the ogres that refused to worship him. This act of flying in the air is symbolic of the supernatural power shown by the Buddha, which resembles that of the indigenous supernatural forces. The Buddha was capable of living on earth with humans and also of flying, and thus can be seen as a medium between the supernatural world and the earth.

The repeated appearance of the Buddha in the land of the Tai is an indication of the purity of Buddhism in the Tai region. The

myths generally remark upon the Buddha reaching a state of enlightenment and travelling to far off lands to carry out the important task of teaching the word of the Buddha. This is especially so of the region of *Suvannabhumi*, mainland Southeast Asia, which was believed to have had a highly developed level of Buddhism due to the influence and teachings of the many previous Buddhas that had visited the region in the past. For example, the myth of *Doi Tung* (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยตุง - Chiang Rai) tells about the Buddha and his travels to this region following the original plan and practice of the previous Buddha. This is in accordance with the myth of *Phanom* (ตำนานพระธาตุพนม - Nakhon Phanom) which tells about the Buddha's travels to *Kampra* Mountain for the same reasons as the previous three Buddhas and that a future Buddha would also travel to this same region. The claim that the land of the Tai was pure, Buddhism was well developed and also visited by the five Buddhas was regarded as confirmation as well as continuance of Buddhism and also an indication that the region was sacred in the past, the present and the future. Each era was blessed by the visit of the Buddha to the land of the Tai.

"The Buddha's foretelling the future" is another behaviour in the myths of the Buddha's relics. These myths mentioned the Buddha's visions of the future or his predictions as to the state of the region and the communities visited by the Buddha. In some versions the Buddha even predicted the future sites for the construction of stupas. For example, in the myth of *Doi Tung* (ตำนานพระธาตุดอยตุง - Chiang Rai), the Buddha traveled along the Mekhong River to *Doi PuYaa Laojok* Mountain after his prior prediction that the mountain would be known as "*Doi Dtayasaket Banphot*". This shows the change from use of the

local language to the use of the Pali language, regarded as an upgrading in status for the location. The decision to choose the sacred language of Pali (Keyes, 1987: 33, Tambiah S.J, 1970: 258) is regarded as a powerful media and further increased the efficiency of building up the belief and faith of the local people. This is because the Tai people thought of the Pali language as the actual words of the Buddha and were the words of one with real power.

Furthermore, the construction of stupas could reflect the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs. Many myths mentioned that both local and Buddhist deities assisted in the construction of the stupas, as can be seen in the myth of *Prabaht Rangrung* (ตำนานพระธาตุพระบาทหรั่งรุ้ง - Hang, Myanmar). The myth tells that the Buddha gave locks of his hair and a footprint to *Phayanaak* as an object of worship, with *Indra*, deities and ogres assisting in the construction and protection of the stupa along with *Phayanaak*. The content in this myth shows the presence of deities and things sacred from other beliefs in the construction of the Buddha's stupa. This shows the integration of the characters of both belief systems joining together in the construction and upkeep of the stupa and is thus regarded as the taking of sacred objects and deities of indigenous beliefs for the use of Buddhist activities.

If we analyse the roles of the characters representing both beliefs, we may refer to Emile Durkheim (1954: 47). He said that religion is a systematic belief and practice that creates a sense of unity with a relationship to sacred objects. This can be seen in the integration of spirits and Buddhism in the construction of the Buddha's stupa, indicating the creation of a relationship or accord between the two

belief systems, with the Buddha as the medium between the two belief systems.

The integration of the two belief systems is still evident in the roles and behaviour of the Tai mythical characters. For example, the myth of *Doi Tung* (ตำนานพระธาตุคอกช้าง-Chiang Rai), *Indra* sent *Laojok* to be born on earth, *Laojok* thus descending to earth via a silver staircase and into the region of *Doi Tung*. This is similar to the basis of sky spirits and ancestral spirits that sent down spirits to rule the kingdoms. Thus *Indra* plays a very similar role as the local deities. This is similar to the myth of *Bua Bok* (ตำนานพระธาตุบัวบก-Udon Thani) which narrates the story of the Buddha blessing *Phayanaak* with golden scales, and the place upon which the scales fall would be holy and a place of worship for the people. This reflects the adaptation of the myths and presents the loss of the golden scales as tantamount to being representative of the Buddha's holy stupa. Thus, we can see an interesting integration of the two belief systems.

It has been observed that in the myth of *Bua Bok* (ตำนานพระธาตุบัวบก-Udon Thani), *Phayasuvannanaak* had golden scales, and upon losing its scales in a particular place, that place would become a sacred place for mankind. Thus, the time when the Buddha was not apparent upon earth, *Phayanaak* would appear as a deity that would be worshipped by the people. Even during later times and the rise in the popularity of Buddhism as the main religion, the Tai people have maintained their belief in the power and sacredness of *Phayanaak* to this very day. The material in this myth indicates traces of indigenous beliefs of the Tai people and their relationship with things sacred, that being the golden scales of *Phayanaak*, a basis of the indigenous beliefs. This is comparable to the Buddha's

relics that appear as the basis of the Buddhist beliefs.

The idea of creating a stupa as something sacred is evident in many myths and shows that the location of the stupa was dependent upon the presence of deities or sacred objects of the local people. For example, the myth of *Dam* (ตำนานพระธาตุคำ-Vientiane) states that prior to the construction of the *Dam* stupa, the area was formerly the location of seven *Phayanaak*. The stupa was built over the holes of *Phayanaak*'s nest. This is similar to the myth of *Nguu Suang* (ตำนานพระธาตุงูขาว-Chaiyaphum) which tells about the construction of Buddha images and a stupa over the hole of the snake known as *Nguu Suang*. The myth of *Jom Thong* (ตำนานพระธาตุจอมทอง-Chiang Rung) states that ogres received the Buddha's hair and then built a stupa upon the site of its former home. The explanation as to the construction and location of the stupa on the land that used to be the sacred land of the local people highlights the integration of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, the sacred topography used to harmonise and strengthen the integration of the two belief systems.

The book entitled **Sacred Sites, Sacred Places** (David L. Carmichael et. al., 1994: 2-2) looks at the meaning and importance of sacred locations. It is postulated that these sacred locations are able to show the changes and cultural harmonisation of each group of people. This explanation shows that the local sacred locations of the Tai people were adapted as locations for the stupa, a sacred object of the Buddhist belief. This also reflects the positive integration of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs and the interesting way of co-existence between the two religious systems.

Conclusion

Beliefs and religion are of great interest and have been used by academics of various institutions as issues in their studies and analyses. In this paper the author has tried to indicate the significance of the myths of the Buddha's relics as folklore data so as to be used in the study of the relationship between the indigenous beliefs and the Buddhism of the Tai people. The author is interested in studying the relationship between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs of the Tai people that appear in the myths of the Buddha's relics, both in traditional literary form and the more prevalent traditional oral form.

The study of the characteristic of the relationship between indigenous beliefs and Buddhism shows that the conflict and integration of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs have many different characteristics. These characteristics indicate the development of the Tai religious system through the analysis of the mythical characters and the apparent behaviour throughout the myths. The strong faith of the Tai people towards indigenous beliefs is still evident as can be seen by their presence in Folk Buddhism. This indicates that indigenous beliefs both fortified and helped promote the acceptance and widespread of Buddhism in the Tai communities to this very day.

However, many of the myths show that the Buddha held the highest power and no deity possessed power that could rival the Buddha's. One important behavioural pattern that appears in the myths is the "subduing of Mara". Initially the Tai people believed that the local characters would conquer the Buddha but eventually Buddhism conquered. Most of the myths stand in the position of showing the

integrated aspects of the two religious systems. We can thus assume that the myths of the Buddha's relics were created after the majority of people had already accepted Buddhism and had become Buddhists.

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