



Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism

Edited by Paul T. Cohen. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017, 272 pages, ISBN 978-87-7694-194-9 (hardcover), £60; ISBN 978-87-7694-195-6 (paperback), £19.99.

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The aim of this skillfully edited volume is to shed light on new dynamics in the Lanna Buddhism of Northern Thailand. There are pictures of the most charismatic monks of Lanna Buddhism on the book's cover, including Kruba Bunchum, the most popular living saint, and the deceased but revitalized Khruba Sriwichai, living in the second half of the nineteenth century (1878–1939), which reflect well the question discussed in this book: How and why is a monk venerated for his charisma? These charismatic monks, called holy men (Thai: *ton bun*), are at the center of the revitalization of northern Thai Yuan Buddhism, not only in northern Thailand, but also in the Shan state of Myanmar and in Sipsongpanna, southwest China. Kruba is an honorary title bestowed on the monks by their followers for their moral and spiritual leadership, but there is also a very culturally specific appointment ceremony exercised by the supreme patriarch of the Shan Sangha from Chiang Tung (Kengtung).

Every chapter in this volume is empirically rich and worth reading on its own. The volume as a whole examines the role of Buddhist holy men in a rapidly transforming world. It begins with a helpful and informative introduction by the editor. As Cohen explains, northern Thailand has a strong millenarian Buddhist tradition, with expectations of the advent of the future Buddha Ariya Metteya (Maitreya), who will liberate impoverished peasants from exploitation and suffering and bring economic prosperity. Cohen rightly underlines the Karen tradition of messianic leaders who aimed to establish strong moral proto-utopian communities guided by Buddhist values. But, unlike the northeastern Phi Bun tradition, the Karen leaders welcomed royal support when it was forthcoming and thus participated in the difficult path of national integration.

Next, the book examines the charismatic Khruba Sriwichai, who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as masterfully presented by Katherine Bowie. Khruba Sriwichai combined other-worldly qualities of the forest monk with this-worldly concerns for economic development. Widely renowned for his superhuman powers, Sriwichai enjoyed huge popular support and was able to mobilize capital and labor to erect meritorious religious buildings, temples,

ordination halls, and pagodas. In her chapter, Bowie explains that Sriwichai is rightly seen as a central figure of Lanna resistance to Siamese oppression and domination in northern Thailand. The population, stricken by devastating epidemics and the fear of military conscription, projected its hope on the charismatic monk to mobilize discontent toward the Siamese assault on local cultural traditions and on the Lanna sangha in particular. As Cohen explains, Sriwichai is also at the center of the current revitalization of the personality cult in Lanna and the emergence of a new generation of living saints. Sriwichai was called Khruba, an honorary title underlining his wisdom, prestige, asceticism, and especially his contribution to Lanna Buddhism. Sriwichai is widely revered for building the magnificent temple Doi Suthep and the road leading to it, on a hill overlooking Chiang Mai. His temples have become pilgrimage sites, widely venerated by the Lanna population who come to circumambulate the temple in golden robes and to pray. Bowie has added innovative and original research on Sriwichai's role as a supporter of the ordinary peasant as well as how the elites in Thailand have sought to appropriate the popularity of Sriwichai for their own purposes. Sriwichai's new popularity is largely due to his contributions to the renovation of old and sacred monasteries, having built or renovated 116 monasteries and temples in all provinces of Lanna. For this, Sriwichai received financial support from Sino-Thai elites and free labor from the peasantry surrounding the monasteries. Bowie sees the current generation of charismatic monks as aiming to emulate the religious works of Khruba Sriwichai to achieve saintly status.

The revitalization of the Lanna tradition started with increasing decentralization, the enormous growth of tourism in Lanna, the growth of a fully-fledged university, and new self-confidence in Lanna in the 1980s. Dissatisfied with an increasingly empty state sangha and thirsty for new spirituality, the new urban middle class in Chiang Mai and urban centers in Lanna turned toward a new generation of Khruba—charismatic monks, teachers, and religious leaders. Outside of the structure of the sangha, but not in opposition to it, the Khruba attract large followings and are widely famous for their qualities and powers that echo Sriwichai's characteristics. The Khrubas are at the center of a revitalization of Lanna Buddhism and the building of a Buddha land comprising a transnational moral community centered on the personality cult of the holy men.

Khruba monks are described as monks of exceptional qualities and supernatural powers who are given the honorary title of Khruba either by their devotees or by the Supreme Patriarch of Shan State in a formal ritual. Outstanding qualities of the Khruba are exceptional learning, superhuman abilities acquired through ascetic and meditative disciplines, and contributions to Buddhism in the form of building ordination halls and pagodas and renovating older Buddhist structures.

Cohen, in his own chapter, insightfully compares the traditions of Lanna (northern Thailand) with that of Isan (northeastern Thailand). Both Khruba Sriwichai and Achan Man Phurihatto, and their lineages, adhered to the Buddhist forest-monk tradition, including conforming to the thirteen ascetic (*dhutanga*) practices. Cohen cites the work of Charles Keyes (1984) pointing out divergences between the two figures. Keyes identifies Sriwichai as a bodhisattva while identifying Achan Man

as an arahant who uncompromisingly renounces the world in order to achieve enlightenment and release from rebirth. Cohen also builds on Jim Taylor's (2008) work, arguing a tendency for commodification in both traditions, with urban elite patronage changing the dynamics of ascetic Buddhism.

Anthony Lovenheim Irwin's chapter discusses the aspirations and achievements of two Khrubas, Khruba Kham La and Khruba Intha, who contributed to the building of religious monuments in an effort to construct a Buddhist kingdom. Irwin argues this religious construction is the focus of Lanna Buddhism and that these Khrubas accumulated charisma by giving their followers the opportunity of merit making. Cohen again has classified this type of Buddhist revivalism as a form of "active utopianism" (1984).

Mikael Gravers' chapter explores the efforts of Karen Khrubas in the millenarian tradition to establish proto-utopian, moral communities based on strict Buddhist injunctions. As with the forest mystics in Isan, the Khruba millenarian leaders were first regarded with suspicion by the Thai state, but were later endorsed and benefitted from the full support of members of the Thai royal family. This support transformed the hermitage Huai Tom from an isolated utopian community to a major pilgrimage site in northern Thailand. Gravers' chapter points out the efforts of Thai elites in Bangkok to appropriate, sponsor, and harness local movements and cults.

The chapter by Kwanchewan Buadaeng focuses on emerging agencies and different classes of devotees, using the concept of assemblages. Kwanchewan shows that the ascetic leader and staunch Karen nationalist U Thuzana received massive moral and material support from groups with vastly different social positions, with devotee communities comprising traditional groups of highland believers, a large segment of Karen migrant workers who find consolidation in the Khruba, and, more recently, a billionaire who invited the Khruba to reside in his Disney-like Buddhist theme park in Chonburi province.

In his chapter, Sean Ashley gives an ethnography of Khruba Jao Theuang, who promotes himself as a reincarnation of Sriwichai. Indeed, Jao Theuang built a very luxurious monastery in marble and gold on the grounds of Sriwichai's temple at Wat Banden. Ashley focuses his chapter on the endorsement of Theuang by the Dara'ang, who have migrated to Chiang Mai Province and who have faced hardships and confrontation with Thai authorities. Theuang provided the Dara'ang with food, blankets, infrastructure (roads and bridges), in addition to blessing them and—in the Dara'ang view—miraculously providing them with food and protection from harm. This is a case in which the Khruba is clearly identified as a savior but also as a powerful patron who is not only able to control the field of merit, but also to provide invaluable access to resources helping the Dara'ang overcome marginalization in Thai society. The fine chapter by Tatsuki Kataoka complements Ashley's as it shows the strong loyalty of the non-Buddhist and non-Thai community of the highland Lahu to the most famous Khruba of the region today: Khruba Bunchum. The Lahu

regard Khruba Bunchum as a God-king and have strong millenarian, apocalyptic expectations of the advent of the future Buddha or God-King.

The Shan, discussed in length in the innovative chapter by Amporn Jirattikorn, regard Bunchum as a bodhisattva. Using a similar frame to Kwanchewan, outlined above, Amporn argues that we ought to go beyond a frame of traditional messianism to understand the phenomenon of rising Khruba monks. Amporn creatively explores postmodern forms of marketing and promoting the Khruba in social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. These postmodern forms of communication connect the Khruba and his image with different kinds of followers: impoverished highland communities, the Thai urban middle class, and the Thai urban wealthy elites. Through a rich examination of the location of Khruba Bunchum in the local geography as well as the political economy, Amporn shows that the Khruba today not only fulfills millenarian expectations, but he uses his position in the Buddhist field to mobilize capital and labor. In this sense, Khruba Bunchum meets the expectations and modern needs of asceticism (in the forest-monk imaginary) and the status of a cultural or business entrepreneur: he is a wealthy ascetic who is seen to spend all his fortune on Buddhist revivalism.

This volume brings us rich and rewarding case-studies of Buddhist revivalism in northern Thailand. I would have liked to have seen more analysis of the economic and political entanglements of the Khruba, especially of the emerging and complex patronage networks of influential monks. As Amporn argues, charisma does not simply arise naturally, but is increasingly founded on concerted marketing campaigns. I would also have appreciated the volume exploring the dynamics and procedures of monetary redistribution, as monks build much of their fame on their generosity in giving and donating. The reviewer participated in the appointment ceremony of Khruba Jao Thueang in January 2017 at Wat Sai Muang, in Tachileik, Myanmar. Northern Thailand and Shan State seem to be the centers of the new cult, and there is a combination of the bodhisattva ideal with sacral kingship, realized in the relative cultural autonomy of Theravada Buddhism in Shan State, in comparison to the relatively centralized Sangha in northern Thailand. This focus on Buddhist morality in an imagined transnational moral community has been described by Cohen in an earlier article (2001). But surely, the rising personalized cult of neo-Khruba monks is located in very different and postmodern contexts, and it would have been good if the authors addressed the aspect of power and different appropriations of the Khruba by different power networks. Contemporary Khruba monks refer to Yuan Buddhism, a particular variant of Theravada Buddhism among Thai-speaking people in the upper Mekong region, but obviously contemporary Theravada Buddhist practice and its material basis is not equivalent to traditional practice. So, Yuan Buddhism is more a signifier in the new Buddha Land, stimulating the imagination of religious pilgrims and tourists. The reviewer would like to have seen more discussion along these lines, outside of the contributions by Amporn Jirattikorn and Kwanchewan Buadaeng. Finally, the chapters could have spoken to each other more. Still, as a whole, I highly recommend this book to scholars working

on Thai Buddhism, on charisma, on Theravada Buddhism, and scholars interested in the cultures and people of mainland Southeast Asia more generally.

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