

Religious Festival and Identity: A Case Study of Mon National Living in Kamawet Village Tracts, Mon State

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Abstract

This research is religious festivals and identity of Mon national living in Kamawet village tracts, Mudom Township, Mon State. The specific objectives of this study are (1) to explore the religious festival and identity of Mon national in Kamawet Village tract, (2) to find out how they celebrate their religious festivals, (3) to explore how festivals influence individual and social identities. Religious festivals may influence the identity of the people involved and the host community itself. Anthropologists have agreed that the major characteristics of a goal definition of religion include belief in supernatural beings and supernatural power, symbolic expression of feelings, and rituals performed both individually and in groups for the purpose of influencing supernatural beings and power (*Crapo, 2002*). Ritual is patterned, repetitive behavior focused on the supernatural realm. There are two types of rituals: sacred rituals and secular rituals. In this study, two types of rituals were explored. This research is based on an ethnographic research study. Data collection techniques are applied in group interview, key informant interview, in-depth interview and observation. These religious festivals provide core activities that build on or are displayed in a frame of local culture and heritage. In line with the approach, it is concluded that festivals do influence the identities of people and place and that all processes related to festivals influence the need to belong.

Keywords: Festivals, identities, sacred ritual, secular ritual and religion

Introduction

Background to the study

This research has suggested that religious festivals may influence the identity of the people involved and the host community itself. Religion may be regarded as the beliefs and patterns of behavior by which humans try to deal with what they view as important problems that cannot be solved with known technology or organizational techniques (*Haviland, 1999*). Anthropologists have agreed that the major characteristics of a goal definition of religion include belief in supernatural beings and supernatural power, symbolic expression of feelings, and rituals performed both individually and in groups for the purpose of influencing supernatural beings and power (*Crapo, 2002*).

A ritual is patterned, repetitive behavior focused on the supernatural realm. There are two types of rituals: sacred rituals and secular rituals. Regularly performed rituals are called “periodic rituals”. Many periodic rituals are performed annually to mark a seasonal milestone such as planting or harvesting or to commemorate an important event. For example, Buddha’s Day, an important periodic ritual in Buddhism, commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha (all on one day). On this day, Buddhists gather at monasteries, hear sermons about the Buddha, and perform rituals such as pouring water over images of the Buddha. Cylindrical events, such as the shortest day of the year, the longest day, the new moon, and the full moon, often shape ritual cycle. “Non-periodic rituals”, in contrast, occur irregularly, at unpredictable times, in response to and scheduled events, such as a drought or flood, or to mark events in a person’s life, such as illness, infertility, birth, marriage, or death (*Barbara, 2011*). In this study, periodic rituals were explored.

Therefore, periodic ritual is the annual performance of seasonal festival. Festival may influence place identity through strengthening the place-belongingness for the people involved

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in the festivals and for the host community itself. "Interrogating festival settings has yielded insights into how people's sense of their own identity is closely bound up with their attachment to place" and the sense of place may contribute to the shaping of individuals (Derrett, 2003). In many festivals, central criteria are that the festival should reflect local values and that the festival is arranged in order to promote and preserve local history or culture (De Bres & Davis, 2001). Community-based festivals are celebrated for both group and place identities, and often, festival patronage among locals is higher in smaller places than in larger ones, relative to population size.

Identity is formed by the interaction between self, others, and society, and builds a bridge between the inside and the outside, the personal and the public worlds (Karlsen, 2007). Three identity levels may be differentiated: personal identity, social identity, and collective identity (Snow, 2001). Personal identities are attributes and meanings ascribed to oneself by the subject himself/ herself. They are self – designations and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive, that is, "those aspects of the self that differentiate the self from all others". Added to this, the development of an extended self, a social identity or social self, is seen as a basic of fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Those identities may be differentiated into two levels: "those that derive from interpersonal relationships and interdependence with specific other organizations" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p.83).

Thus, this study seeks to investigate, to explore how periodic rituals and non-periodic rituals are performed by Mon nationals living in Kamawet village tract, Mudon Township, Mon State, interrelate with social and economic circumstances, how they have handed down their traditions to new generations and how their rituals are performed differently from those of Mon in other regions.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the religious festival and identity of Mon national in Kamawet Village tract, Mudone Township, Mon state.

Specific objective:

- To find out how they celebrate their religious festivals
- To explore how festivals, influence individual and social identities.

Research question:

- What are the religious festivals of local people?
- How Mon nationals have been maintaining their significant religious festival and identity?

Conceptual Framework

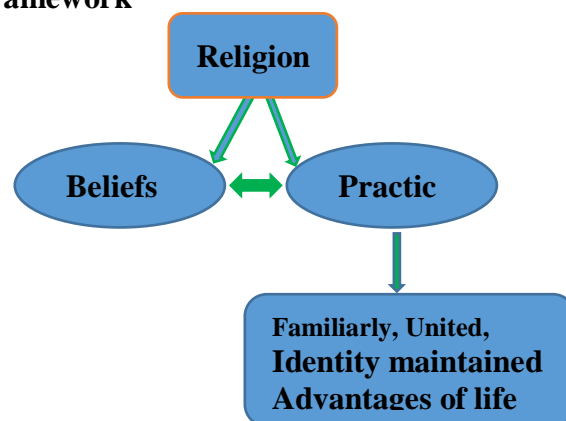


Figure 1. Influencing factors on religious festival and identity

Research Methodology

Study Design – Descriptive study Design was applied in this research.

Study Area – Kamawet Village Tracts, Mudon Township, Mon State.

Study Population – In this research study, 50 persons of Mon national living in Kamawet village tract were chosen.

Study Period - This study was conducted during (2013-2014) academic year.

Data Collection methods - To collect data ethnographic research method was used. As data collection, the techniques Focus Group Interview (FGI), Key Informant Interview (KII), In-depth Interview (IDI) and Observation were used. Data was collected until enough information. If new information is not obtained, the interview will be stopped. Data analysis was done based on thematic data analysis.

Data collection tools - In the same evening of each and every qualitative data collection day, their transcripts were completed. Each theme was analyzed manually according to themes and sub-themes. To be valid data, the findings were tested by triangulation.

Finding

Introduction

According to the interview, Mon National living in Kamawet village tract hold annual festivals and warship traditional spirits. Thought veneration of sacred objects such as relics of the Buddha, bamboo tube, cloth and coconut for the spirits, their stresses could be alloyed. So, they worship those things as their symbols annually. Some do as pledge. By keeping those symbols in the house, they believe that social and economic conditions would run smoothly.

Jaya pagoda festival

Mon in Kamawet village hold Jaya pagoda festival from 1 to 2 waxing moon in Tagu (April) besides the New Year festival. On the second day of waxing moon, bachelors and maidens wear their Mon traditional costumes and bring a Buddha statue from Jaya pagoda to be venerated by the villagers. Maidens follow after the statue and bachelors take the pictures of the Buddha. Then, workmanship of paintings is contested. Village administrative chiefs and pagoda trustees distribute prizes for them. In olden days, on the first day waxing moon, maidens carried oil lamps, and bachelors sang and danced with troupe and they offered one thousand lamps to the Buddha. However, beginning from the late 2000, children have participated in lamp donation (see in figure 1).



Figure1. Children carried oil lamps

Kyaiktamaw pagoda festival

One week before the festival, necessary items and foods are obtained through donation round the village by each group. Members of every household are ready enough to distribute things and foods as much as they could afford. Those from five villages are allotted for sundry matters in turn so that they could entertain guests. Villagers actively participate in feeding pilgrims (see in figure 2). Youths are obliged to do their tasks dutifully, without being forced by the leader. Those who perform sundry matters cook meals in day and night in turn. Women are to wash dishes, serve more rice, curries and fish paste at dining tables. When the meals run out, they stop serving guests. Thus, villagers in Kamawet village tract participate in such meritorious occasions by lending a hand actively and harmoniously.



Figure 2. Donating round the villagers

As Kyaiktamaw Bagoda has been established on top of the hill, it is difficult enough to access. So, the religious festival is held on the hill, but offering alms and foods for monks is performed in front of Jaya Bagoda. On the second day of the festival, from about 7 o'clock in the morning, the donation spot is fixed at the main road in front of the gate of Jaya pagoda and raw rice is donated to monks (see in figure 3). In the donation, monks numbering 700 from Kamawet village tract, Mudon Township and some associated monasteries from Moulmein are invited to receive offertories such as raw rice, snacks, medicine, monastic accessories and money as much as they could afford.



Figure 3. Communal offering provisions
by various articles



Figure 4. Drawing lot either the recipient or
the gift in a religious offering to Buddhist monks

Fund trees are raised by those who are rich villagers, businessmen in other regions and move to other regions as many as they could afford. According to the funds, villagers invite monks (see in figure 4). The amount of money in a fund tree is at least 50,000 to 3,000,000 kyats (2014) and there are over one hundred to about two hundred fund trees. But, the numbers of fund trees differ from year to year out of economic conditions and volition of

donors. Then, monks take random black sticks and donors serve them with ice-cream, cakes, choicest fruits, pickled tea and plain tea in pandals.

From 1 o'clock in the afternoon on the third day, bachelors, maidens and even children wear their traditional dressing; carry Buddha images decorated by flowers of lights and go round the village for the veneration of the Buddha (see in figure 5). A troupe of short drums, flutes and cymbals follow the bachelors joyously. As Jaya pagoda was established by Hermit Uluka and Jaya mayor, on account of Jaya mayor, in the festival, they wear royal attire. Then, youths and bachelors make figures of the Buddha, and compete their workmanship. Members of the pagoda trustees and village elders select and distribute first, second and third prizes according to excellent work, naturalness and styles of attire of the group. After going round the village, the Buddha images are carried to Jaya pagoda and they shoot fireworks as a victory. Thus, being devoted and generous, Mons in Kamawet village performs meritorious deeds continuously.



Figure 5. Bachelors and maidens wear their Mon traditional costumes and bring Jaya pagoda to be venerated

In addition, in this study, almost all the Mon living in Kamawet village tract believe in Buddhism and are devotees of Buddhism. They not only celebrate religious festivals seasonally but keep precepts during and beyond the Lent. They also do acts of merit. From the above fact, it is said that although Mon nationals live in different regions of Myanmar, they are believers in Buddhism and they are ardent enough to perform meritorious deeds.

Traditional family spirits or ancestor spirit

In spite of believing in Buddhism, Mon in Kamawet village tract have worshipped traditional family spirits since their forefathers. Most of Mon nationals worship bamboo tube spirit and cloth spirit, but some believe in coconut spirit. A few propitiate the spirit by combining bamboo tube and cloth. All the traditional spirits they worship are also known as “ancestor spirit”.

Ritual Dance

A marquee is built for a ritual feast (see in figure 9). Firstly, bamboo posts in a height of 10 *taung* are erected and a space is reserved for dance. The roof was covered with leaves but now tent. On the left side of the tent, there are orchestra and family members of same Kalok on the right. A dais is also put up on the east side so that the images, accessories, offerings of flowers, candles and fruits are placed on it. On the dais, there are 14 small bowls, 14 plates and a bowl of offertories for the dance according to their respective spirits. Two bunches of bananas and coconuts are included in the bowl of offertories. The small bowls and

plates are filled with traditional snacks such as *mont-kywe-the*, *mont-peinnhe-taung*, etc, half of coconut, a piece of jiggery, a banana, and glutinous rice. They are also prepared for the dance. But, the number of offertory plates is different from other houses.

Then, in performing spirit propitiation (nat festival) according to their tradition, Mon in Kamawet village tract could meet their relatives who worship the same spirit ie, cloth spirit or bamboo tube spirit and it brings about harmony and unity among them. Therefore, it can be said that spirit worship performed by Mon nationals in Kamawet village tract makes their ethnic identity maintaining and solidarity in each other.



Figure 9. Shrine to dance spirit

Discussion and Conclusion

Anthropologists categorize sacred rituals in many ways. Regularly performed rituals are called "periodic rituals." Many periodic rituals are performed annually to mark a seasonal milestone such as planting or harvesting or to commemorate an important event. For example, Buddha's Day, an important periodic ritual in Buddhism, commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha (Miller, 2000).

Similarly, in this study, Mon nationals hold such periodic rituals as in *Tagu* and *Tazaungmon*, *Zayapagoda* festival and *Kyaiktamaw* pagoda festivals. Non-periodic rituals are also held so as to ward off natural disasters such as drought, flood, pestilence, fire, etc, through worshipping guardian god of the house, village spirit and traditional spirits individually or communally.

Two types of rituals have been performed by Mon nationals in Kamawet village tract. Therefore, they believe that they perform such rites in various ways in order to alleviate anxieties and stress of the villagers. Then, by making their descendants and new bloods participate in such rites, they not only maintain their Mon traditions and cultures but strengthen their unity and harmony. Therefore, it is said that they hold festivals so as to meet their relatives again annually. In addition, they maintain religious beliefs and identity by holding such festivals and rites and they hand down those factors to new generations. Mon people living in Kamawet village tract have maintained their traditional festivals with the performance of the youths.

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