

MATERIAL RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: BUDDHIST VISUAL CULTURE AND THE BURMANIZATION OF THE EASTERN SHAN STATE

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To be facing a Buddha image is like being in the presence of the Buddha himself. This may not be obvious to the Western viewer, but to the local Buddhist people, who are aware that the image has been consecrated, it is apparent that an image of the Buddha is more than just a lifeless sculpture. A key property of religious visual culture is that it evokes a sense of the sacred.¹ Making images or venerating and offering before them is a form of motion that allows believers to connect with the sacred, but it is also a way to establish a sacred space and a religious environment. Beautiful objects can attract people and make them feel that they are close to something sacred. According to David Morgan, members of an imagined community “need symbolic forms such as songs, dance, images, and food to allow them to participate in something that is larger both spatially and temporally than their immediate environment.”²

Buddha images and religious buildings are also, as we will see, important visual objects that can act as emblems of ethnic identity and nationalism. They can put in motion political manifestations, such as the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia at the ancient Khmer Preah Vihear temple site, where Buddhist monks on both sides held rituals in support of their respective governments, while accusing the other side of using black magic. This conflict over an ancient Hindu temple has been used for nationalistic purposes by politicians, monks, and the military on both sides.

Ethnicity and religion are among the most important markers of group identity. Ethnic and religious groups serve many functions, and people affiliate with these groups for many reasons. Ethnicity and religion are both essential aspects of the way people perceive their place in the world. In addition to a positive identity, feelings of

¹ Claire Mitchell, “The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities,” *Sociology* 40,6 (2006): 1149.

² David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 59.

certainty, and a sense of belongingness and inclusion, they provide a cultural worldview and meaningfulness.³ According to Claire Mitchell, there appears to be a complex two-way relationship between the religious and ethnic bases of identity, where each can inform and provoke changes in the other.⁴ The intertwining of religious and ethnic identity is particularly visible among ethnic groups of Southeast Asia, and the group identities of Thai, Burmese, and others are intimately connected with Buddhism. Ethnicity and religion have a tendency to merge into each other in such a way that it is nearly impossible to separate them.

Conflicts based on ethnic-religious identity are frequent throughout the world, with religious architecture and visual objects often serving as “powerful means of imagining a common identity.”⁵ Arguably, it is nearly always clearly defined religious traditions that confront each other. Here, however, we will see how ethnic-religious identity can be expressed in a conflict between two ethnic groups nominally sharing the same religious tradition. Most Buddhists in Upper Southeast Asia, e.g., the Burmese, the Thai, the Shan, and the Lao, belong to the same Theravāda tradition of Buddhism. Their canonical texts and doctrines, originating in the Mahāvihāra tradition of Lanka, are nearly identical, and the differences lie mostly in the rituals, in how the *vinaya* rules are observed and in the materialistic aspects of religion.

The present paper has as its primary concern the exemplification of the way religious visual culture may serve as a marker of ethnicity and nationalism. Examples are taken from Buddhist visual culture in the Eastern Shan State of Myanmar. The visual objects considered in this discussion are two very special Buddha statues that can, in different ways, convey Burmese ethnic and religious identity and be seen as elements in the Burmanization of the Shan State. In order to understand the role of these objects, this paper will also discuss, from a perspective of Southeast Asian history, the genuineness of Buddha statues and the reason why some Buddhist images and religious buildings are more sacred than others.

THE TAI KHUN AND THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE EASTERN SHAN STATE

The Eastern Shan State lies east of the Salween River within the Shan State of Myanmar, bordering on Thailand, China, and Laos. The Tai Khun, i.e., the Shan people native to the Eastern Shan State,⁶ have had a long and close relationship with neighboring Tai peoples in northern Thailand, Sipsongpanna, and northern Laos.

Defining ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, just as in many other places, is not an easy task. Southeast Asia is a region of constantly shifting ethnic boundaries, and ethnicity cannot be treated as a primordial given. On the contrary, ethnic groups everywhere constantly redefine themselves and are similarly redefined by others. Michael Moerman notes that ethnicity is impermanent in that individuals,

³ Meykel Verkuyten and Ali Aslan Yildiz, “National (Dis)identification and Ethnic and Religious Identity: A Study among Turkish-Dutch Muslims,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33 (2007): 1448–62.

⁴ Mitchell, “The Religious Content of Ethnic Identities.”

⁵ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, p. 221.

⁶ Tai people in Myanmar are called Shan by the Burmese. The Thai in Thailand call them Tai Yai. They call themselves Tai and recognize numerous subcategories within this ethnic designation. The Tai people traditionally living east of the Salween River call themselves Tai Khun.

communities, and areas change their identification.⁷ According to him, Tai tribal names are political in origin. People define and redefine themselves in relationship to others.⁸

People select their own history in the context of others, and it is necessary to view every social entity as part of a larger system. The self-definition of a people includes attributions made by its neighbors. An ethnic group is a socially constructed community that often defines itself by its origin or language. Thus, a chosen history is one of the main elements in creating a self-definition and prescribing its boundaries for others. I am therefore following Santasombat when he emphasizes that the ethnic identity of a particular Tai group is constructed in a continual process, not only by external forces and labeling by outsiders with whom the Tai interact, but also by their own socio-cultural process of creating a self-definition.⁹ I will define Tai Khun primarily as those who define themselves, and are defined by others, as descendants of the city-state of Chiang Tung.

Chiang Tung,¹⁰ the capital of the Eastern Shan State, was established in the middle of the thirteenth century by King Mangrai, a Tai ruler from the royal family of Chiang Mai. It was attached to the loosely connected state of Lan Na, which consisted of a few large and many smaller autonomous or semi-autonomous principalities or city-states (*muang*) with fluctuating boundaries, subordinated to a Buddhist ruler. These city-states paid tribute to local overlords in kind, and their rulers were required to come to Chiang Mai annually in order to “drink the water of allegiance” in the presence of the king.¹¹ From that time, Chiang Tung was part of the northern Tai cultural area, and there were close connections between Chiang Tung and the main cities in Lan Na. Having been part of Lan Na is, to the Tai Khun people of Chiang Tung, a “chosen glory” (to use a term from Catarina Kinnvall).¹² In 1558, the whole of Lan Na fell to the Burmese, but the connections between the different Tai peoples living in the Upper Mekong area were not severed until 1774, when Lan Na swore allegiance to Siam and Chiang Tung remained as a tributary to the Burmese kingdom, together with the rest of the Shan State.¹³ Since that time, Chiang Tung has been subject to intense cultural Burmanization, but still less so than the rest of the Shan State. The descendants of the Mangrai dynasty of Chiang Mai continued to rule Chiang Tung until the aristocratic system was ended by the Burmese military government in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁴

⁷ Michael Moerman, “Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue?” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 1215–30.

⁸ Heather A. Peters, “Ethnicity along China’s Southwestern Frontier,” *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 3,1–2 (2002): 78.

⁹ Yos Santasombat, *Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁰ Chiang Tung is the Tai rendition of the city name. It can also be given as Keng Tung, among other spellings; the official Burmese transcription is Kyaingtong.

¹¹ Volker Grabowsky, *The Northern Tai Policy of Lan Na (Babai-Dadian) between the Late Thirteenth to Mid-Sixteenth Centuries: Internal Dynamics and Relations with Her Neighbours*, ARI Working Paper 17 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2004), p. 34.

¹² Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology* 25,5 (2004): 741–67.

¹³ Sai Kham Mong, “The Shan in Myanmar,” in *Myanmar: State, Society, and Ethnicity*, ed. Narayanan Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), p. 258.

¹⁴ Sarassawadee Ongsakul, *History of Lan Na* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), p. 100.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, Buddhism was introduced to Chiang Tung by King Mangrai. Later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two different reformist orders, Suan Dok and Pa Daeng, were introduced from Chiang Mai to Chiang Tung. The chronicle of Wat Padaeng describes in detail the trip that a Tai monk took to Lanka in the fifteenth century for the purpose of establishing a new Buddhist order.¹⁵ After his reconsecration in Lanka, he traveled to Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, and Chiang Mai. This new order was eventually introduced in Chiang Tung, where it established itself at the Wat Padaeng monastery, which is still standing.

Today, a traditional Tai Khun Buddhist tradition, with its canonical writings in Tai Khun letters and with forty traditional Tai Khun monasteries located in the Chiang Tung urban area, exists side by side with the Shan and the Burmese Buddhist traditions. These three traditions are distinguished by ethnicity, and their practitioners do not cooperate in rituals. They have their own respective religious festivals and rituals, and the religious buildings have easily identifiable features. Besides visual culture, Tai Khun Buddhism has at least two very important characteristics compared to Burmese and Shan Buddhism. Full moons are not celebrated on the same days as in the Burmese and Shan traditions because Tai Khun Buddhism uses an old calendar system. Further, the recitations in Pali differ in rhythm and intonation compared to recitations made by Burmese and Shan monks, because Tai Khun canonical scriptures are written in Tai Khun letters.¹⁶

James Finch declares that “the eastern Shan State has developed a unique style of sacred art.”¹⁷ This is especially true when compared to Burmese visual culture, but the Tai Khun style is also rather different from that of the rest of the Shan State. Finch seems, however, to be unaware of the historical and cultural divergence between the Tai Khun and the rest of the Shan people. In traditional Tai Khun monasteries, the Buddha images are of a special Tai Khun style, very similar to that of the Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna. Further, the interior of a Tai Khun assembly hall (*vihan*) is characterized by walls and wooden pillars with gold stenciling on a red background and banners (*tong*) hanging from the ceiling, just like in a Tai Lue monastery. Different forms of visual representations of the legend of Prince Vessantara are nearly omnipresent in Chiang Tung traditional monasteries, just as in the rest of the Tai Buddhist cultural sphere. Especially, a pair of wooden animals (an elephant and a horse), placed in front of the main Buddha and representing the gift of Prince Vessantara, plays a prominent part in Tai Khun visual culture.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sai Saimong Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle and the Jengtung State Chronicle Translated* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1981).

¹⁶ For an account of the features of Tai Khun Buddhism, see Klemens Karlsson, “Tai Khun Buddhism and Ethnic-Religious Identity,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 10,1 (2009): 75–83; and Paul T. Cohen, “Buddhism Unshackled: The Yuan ‘Holy Man’ Tradition and the Nation-State in the Tai World,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32,2 (2001): 227–47.

¹⁷ James Finch, “Hidden Burma: The Sacred Art of the Eastern Shan State,” *Arts of Asia*, 36,5 (2006): 143.

¹⁸ For an account of the art and material religion of Tai Khun, see Klemens Karlsson, “Shan Ethnic-Religious Identity: Object, Art, and Material Religion in the Eastern Shan State,” in *Shan and Beyond: Essays on Shan Archaeology, Anthropology, History, Politics, Religion, and Human Rights*, ed. Montira Rato and Khanidtha Kanthavichai (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2011), pp. 117–24. For an account of the importance of the legend of Prince Vessantara in Tai Buddhism in Northeast Thailand and Laos, see the article by Sandra Cate and Leedom Lefferts in this volume.

During the colonial period, the Shan people in British Burma enjoyed an extensive degree of autonomy. Burma proper was a directly administered British colony, while the many small Shan states became protectorates, and each Shan hereditary ruler (*saopha*) was responsible for administration and law enforcement, with an armed police force, civil servants, magistrates, and judges serving in his state. The British plan was originally to stop at the Salween River, as they wanted to avoid sharing a border with France, but the plan was later changed and in 1890 the Shan state of Chiang Tung became part of the British Empire.¹⁹ In 1922, the British created the Federated Shan States, but this came to an end when the Japanese occupied most of Southeast Asia in 1942. Soon after World War II, Burma received independence from Britain and an agreement to unify the country was signed between Burmese nationalists and some of the leaders of the frontier peoples. The Panglong Agreement of 1947 is the key document governing post-war relations between the frontier peoples and the Burmese central government. The Shan people were granted the right to secede from the Union of Burma after a ten-year trial period.²⁰

In 1949, Kuomintang (KMT) forces invaded Chiang Tung from Yunnan and sought refuge in the Shan hills. There were as many as 12,000 KMT soldiers inside Burma, and the Burmese army was unable to oust them. This conflict meant that the Shan became wedged in-between two armed forces, both of which were foreign to the local people. For many Shan peasants, it was the first time they had come in direct contact with any Burmese. The result was a strong Shan nationalist movement, and by 1959 some Shan had taken up guerrilla warfare against the Burmese army. In 1962, General Ne Win and the military took over the Burmese government, and the Shan have been engaged in an intermittent armed conflict ever since. At present, there is a cease-fire agreement between the Government of Myanmar and most of the armed rebellion forces.²¹

The Burmese military regime claims to rule in accordance with the three main national causes: "the non-disintegration of the union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity, and the perpetuation of national sovereignty."²² Military leaders present Buddhism as a bedrock and the basis for national unity and solidarity. The military regime in Myanmar uses Buddhist religion as a powerful political tool to legitimize its power and authority.²³ In an effort to popularize its vision of Myanmar

¹⁹ Ratanaporn Sethakul, "Political Relations between Chiang Mai and Kengtung in the Nineteenth Century," in *Changes in Northern Thailand and the Shan States 1886–1940*, ed. Prakai Nontawasee (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988); Ongsakul, *History of Lan Na*, p. 175.

²⁰ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 79.

²¹ During a certain numbers of years the Government has been negotiating with the ethnic cease-fire armies to make them a government-run Border Guard Force and thus engage them in the political process. After the general election on November 7, 2010, and the by-elections held on April 1, 2012, there has been a drastic change in Burmese politics with renewed negotiating between the Government and ethnic armies, but it is still too early (May 2012) to know whether the changes will result in a lasting and permanent peace.

²² Curtis W. Lambrecht, "Oxymoronic Development: The Military as Benefactor in the Border Regions of Burma," in *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*, ed. Christopher R. Duncan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 150–81.

²³ Janette Philp and David Mercer, "Politicised Pagodas and Veiled Resistance: Contested Urban Space in Burma," *Urban Studies* 39,9 (2002): 1587–1610.

and its national history, the government finances archaeological preservation and reconstruction of sacred sites throughout the modern nation-state.²⁴ There is a continuing process of Burmanization, especially of minority areas, as a way of manifesting the government's dominance over and subordination of ethnic culture and religion among minorities. The palace of Chiang Tung was a symbol of independence for the Shan, and the Tai Khun in particular, and intimidated the Burmese rulers, who consequently destroyed it in the middle of the 1990s. This destruction is an obvious example of the Burmanization of minorities.

THE MAHĀMUNI BUDDHA OF CHIANG TUNG

The Mahāmuni (*Maha Myat Muni*) Buddha image of Chiang Tung is situated in a temple hall in the center of the city and is a quite spectacular image. It is a huge sitting Buddha, golden in appearance and seated on a throne, clad in Burmese royal attire and regalia. It was made in the 1920s as a copy of one of the most famous Buddha images in Burma, the Mandalay Mahāmuni Buddha, which is subject to extensive ritual veneration.²⁵ A ritual is performed every morning at the temple in Mandalay, with monks washing and applying gold-leaf to the image.²⁶ A similar but simpler variant of this ritual takes place every full and new moon at the Chiang Tung Buddha image (see Figure 1). This image is maintained by the Board of Pagoda Trustees, which consists of prominent Tai Khun laypeople, though the people who venerate the image are from all ethnic groups. Monks from different monasteries may be invited to the washing ritual, but always from one ethnic monastic community (*sangha*) at a time.

The original Mahāmuni Buddha in Mandalay was constructed in Arakan (Rakhine State), the western part of today's Myanmar. The mythical tradition places the construction of the Mahāmuni image as far back as the lifetime of the Buddha. Historians judge that the image may be from the fifth century and was probably first installed in the royal shrine of one of the early kings of Arakan. The image has been highly venerated throughout Burmese Buddhist history. It is told that many kings attacked Arakan with the intention of obtaining the Mahāmuni image. King Anawratha of Pagan is said to have failed in his attempt to move the image to his capital.²⁷ Burmese political history of the eighteenth century, especially regarding the kingdom of Bodawpaya, has been closely connected to the Mahāmuni Buddha image. King Bodawpaya was the most powerful of all Konbaung kings, and his reign was a period of military expansion. In 1784, after his invasion of Arakan, he took the Mahāmuni image to his new capital at Amarapura, in present-day Mandalay. The image still resides in Mandalay and is regarded by the Burmese as a national treasure, legitimizing the political power of the present military government.

²⁴ Juliane Schober, "Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture: State Patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Myanmar," *History of Religions* 36,3 (1997): 236.

²⁵ There are copies of the Mahāmuni Buddha in several places in the Shan State, e.g., Tachileik and Hsipaw.

²⁶ Juliane Schober, "In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Mahamuni Image," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp. 259–88; U Thaw Kaung, *Selected Writings of U Thaw Kaung* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2004).

²⁷ Schober, "In the Presence of the Buddha."



Figure 1: Ritual veneration of the Chiang Tung Mahāmuni Buddha, January 2006.
Photo by Klemens Karlsson

According to the legend of the Mahāmuni, the Buddha once flew, with five hundred of his followers, to visit King Candasuriya at Dhanyawadi. It is told that Indra made the image, just outside the palace of King Candasuriya, and that after its construction, the Buddha breathed life into it.²⁸ This story is a version of an old Buddhist legend about the origin of the first image of the Buddha. It expresses the view that the Buddha visited Myanmar and that the Mahāmuni image is a true and exact likeness of him. For this reason, it is believed that the image can act as an adviser to the ruler who is in possession of it, and it thus serves to legitimize that ruler.

The construction of the Chiang Tung replica was not an act of some prominent Burmese person. Instead, the making of the image was commissioned by the hereditary ruler of Chiang Tung, Sao Kawn Kiao Intaleng, together with the abbot of Wat Zaing Ngarm. Officials were sent by the *saopha* to Mandalay to oversee the casting of the image, which was done by U Tit and his workers in 1921. Thereafter, the image was brought in pieces to Chiang Tung by boat and bullock cart and

²⁸ Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001), pp. 29–39.

installed in a temporary building. In 1926, the image was finally installed in its present building (Wat Phra Sao Luang) in the center of town.

As the original image is a prominent part of Burmese national identity, to copy the Mahāmuni Buddha can be seen as an example of cultural Burmanization. At the time of the replica's construction and installation in Chiang Tung, increasing connections were being established between the Eastern Shan State and the Burmese culture, and the Buddha can be perceived as a representation of those ties. The Mahāmuni image stands as a reminder of a time when the Shan states enjoyed a measure of independence and were keen to have good relations with the Burmese.

The history and myth of the Mahāmuni Buddha is an example of the way art and visual culture can express ethnicity and political hegemony. The image establishes a link with sacred Buddhist history, with the Buddha himself, and with the Burmese history of military conquest. It is therefore remarkable that the long-lasting civil war in the Shan State, in which the Shan State Army South (SSA-S) is fighting the military government, has not prevented Tai Khun and Shan from continuing to venerate the Mahāmuni image and to consider it to be an exceptionally sacred image. By the time the Mahāmuni image was constructed, the country was under British rule and each Shan State enjoyed a measure of administrative independence as British protectorates. Chiang Tung had also suffered three Siamese invasions between 1849 and 1854, repulsing them with Burmese and Shan aid. Chiang Mai was at that time a power in decay and dependent on Siam.²⁹ As a result, Burmese influence in the area increased, and the ruler of Chiang Tung ordered the copying of a Burmese Buddha and not one of the highly venerated Buddha images from northern Thailand (for example, the *Phra Buddha Sihing*, in Chiang Mai).

Today, there is one specific piece of cloth that indicates that Burmese military leaders have symbolic control of the Mahāmuni image. A baldachin of orange cloth is placed at the top of the head of the Buddha. A piece of blue cloth with the names of the present military commander in Chiang Tung and his wife are stuck on the baldachin. Every time a new commander takes office in Chiang Tung, a donation ritual is made, and the names on the baldachin are replaced. Before the military coup in 1962, it was possible for ordinary people to donate robes to this Mahāmuni image as an act of merit. Today, it is strictly prohibited for ordinary people to donate clothes to the image.

The names on the baldachin imply that the military commander and his wife are the main donors contributing to the image and that everyone who enters the temple and donates flowers, food, or gold leaves does it under military protection. This symbolic control of the image manifests that all merit from veneration and donations made by ordinary people goes to the main donor, the present military commander.

However, during the daytime, a steady stream of local Tai Khun visitors can be observed contemplating and paying homage to the image, despite the symbols of Burmese control. The reason for this favorable reception is the belief that the connection between this image and the historical Buddha is particularly powerful, as it is believed that it was the Buddha himself who breathed life into the image. The image is therefore regarded by the Tai Khun as especially sacred, and to be sitting in front of the Mahāmuni Buddha is like being in the presence of the Buddha himself. As long as the Board of Pagoda Trustees remains in the hands of the Tai Khun, ethnic

²⁹ Sethakul, "Political Relations," p. 305.

Tai Khun Buddhists will almost certainly continue to venerate the image. There is reason to suppose that, in the future, the Burmese will want to obtain important positions on the Board of Pagoda Trustees as well, to gain greater control.

THE KHEMARATTHA STANDING BUDDHA

In recent years, the Burmese government has, in an effort to popularize itself, constructed religious buildings and Buddha images all over Burma. In the year 2000, the construction of a huge standing and pointing Buddha image was completed on Swamhsat Hill in the outskirts of Chiang Tung. The prominent image (see Figures 2 and 3), more than twenty meters tall from head to foot and illuminated in the evenings, can be seen from throughout the city.³⁰



Figure 2: Khemarattha Standing Buddha. Photograph by Klemens Karlsson

At Tachilek, a border town close to Thailand, there is a copy, built in 1993, of Yangon's famous Shwedagon Pagoda (see Figure 4). Shwedagon is one of the most venerated Buddhist shrines in Burma and is connected with the establishment of Buddhism in early Burma. Shwedagon is connected with the life-story of the Buddha and the relic of the eight sacred hairs of the Buddha, but it also has a long history connected with Burma's kings and rulers.³¹

Both the enormous Buddha image and the pagoda were constructed on the initiative of the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military, and stand today as reminders of

³⁰ The image is called "Khemarattha Standing Buddha Image" in the official government organ *The New Light of Myanmar*, April 9, 2002. Huge standing and pointing Buddha statues have also been constructed by the government at other places around Myanmar, e.g., in Mongla at the Chinese border and Hsipaw in the Northern Shan State.

³¹ Elizabeth Moore, "Shwedagon: Its History and Architecture," in *Shwedagon: Golden Pagoda of Myanmar*, ed. Narisa Chakrabongse (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), pp. 144–48.

Burmese supremacy and sovereignty and as symbols of Burmese Buddhist legitimacy in a Shan and Tai Khun area. Both the Standing Buddha and the Tachilek Pagoda are constructed in the tradition of Burmese visual culture, with no connection to Tai Khun or Shan visual culture. An obvious example of a typically Burmese stylistic element is the eight planetary shrines associated with the days of the week constructed around both the Standing Buddha statue and the Tachilek pagoda, just like at the original Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Another well-known motif often used in Burmese art is the Hamsa bird, a statue of which can be found on a tall pillar at the site of the Standing Buddha. The Hamsa is a sacred goose found in Hindu and Buddhist mythology and has been especially connected with the Mon people in southern Burma. At the pagoda there is also a shrine for the legendary monk Upagupta, a common figure in Burmese visual culture, but rare in Tai Buddhism and culture.



Figure 3: Khemaraththa Standing Buddha. Photograph by Klemens Karlsson

The history of the Standing Buddha began in 1995, when, as the story is told, a couple of small Buddha sculptures were found in the ground at the site of the Chiang Tung Weather Department. The images were established to be very old, and it was decided to relocate the weather department and build a sacred site at the top of the

hill. The construction of the statue between 1998 and 2000 was, according to the information plaque at its base, led by General Thein Sein and his wife, Daw Khin Khin Win.³²



Figure 4: Shwedagon, Tachileik. Photograph by Klemens Karlsson

The statue, with its outstretched, pointing hand, resembles a famous statue on Mandalay Hill.³³ The Pointing Buddha at Mandalay was built by King Mindon in the mid-nineteenth century, and it is associated with Burmese nationalism. The statue was part of King Mindon's sacred building program that resulted in the erection of a royal palace, city walls, pagodas, and monasteries during the establishment of his new capital, which he built in order to express his role as a Buddhist protector and *cakravartin* (universal ruler). It is told that the Buddha visited Mandalay Hill and that an ogress worshipped him there. The Buddha then pointed at the foot of the hill and prophesied that a great Buddhist city would be established there 2,400 years later, and that the ogress would be reborn as the king who would establish that city. When King Mindon established Mandalay in the mid-nineteenth century, he associated himself with the ogress and the king who was envisaged by the Buddha.³⁴ Thus, the Pointing Buddha was the centerpiece of King Mindon's construction program as it connected with the Buddha himself and with his prophecy, portraying the king as

³² From 1996 General Thein Sein led the Triangle Regional Military Command in Keng Tung. From 2007 until 2011, he served as the prime minister and after the 2010 general election he became Myanmar's first civilian president.

³³ The statue at Chiang Tung is not an official copy of the one at Mandalay Hill.

³⁴ Cynthia Warso, "The Pointing Buddha Image of Mandalay Hill: Gautama Buddha 'Shows the Way' in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Burma (Master of Arts thesis, Northern Illinois University, 2004).

the one who would rescue the country from the British and establish a golden Buddhist Empire.

According to the legend of the origin of Chiang Tung, the Buddha and forty-nine of his followers visited Swamhsat Hill, which at that time was surrounded by a big lake, and left behind eight hairs from his head. He also made a prophecy, saying that a hermit would come along and drain the water from the lake and found a city in its place, and that a king would later establish a *sangha* there.³⁵ As already mentioned, Buddhism was introduced to the area by monks from Chiang Mai, and the city was established by a Tai king in the thirteenth century. However, in an attempt to establish a historical Burmese connection to the city, the information sign at the base of the Standing Buddha indicates that the supposedly first Buddhist building on the hill, the Anawratha Pagoda, was made by an ancient Burmese king in the year 734 (according to the Burmese calendar, or 1372 CE). The pagoda must have been named for the pagan King Anawratha, one of the main rulers and conquerors who figures in Burmese history. Nevertheless, according to several chronicles, this was the time when King Khaen Lek, the son of Chiang Mai ruler Ku Na, ruled Chiang Tung. It was also the time of the first Singhalese reformist order being established in Chiang Tung, after first having reached Sukhothai and Chiang Mai.³⁶ Thus, the authorities who constructed the statue wanted to declare that Buddhism, even in this remote area, was introduced by the Burmese, not by the Shan, Tai Khun, or Lan Na, despite historical evidence to the contrary.

There is seemingly a double meaning to the Standing Buddha. First, it symbolizes the origin of Chiang Tung and Buddha's visit to the hill and his prophecy that an important Buddhist city would be established there. The second meaning is a negative one: the statue can be regarded as a symbol of the way local people must live under the supremacy of the Burmese government. Some locals I have spoken to believe that the giant standing Buddha is a fake, not made in a proper way. There are rumors that the statue is dangerous and ill-omened, and people see symbolic significance in its having been struck by lightning not long after its construction. Therefore, some local people avoid walking near the statue because doing so, they believe, may bring misfortune.³⁷

Local people avoid interacting with Chiang Tung's standing Buddha because it is placed outdoors and was not made according to local tradition. The image was fashioned in an unusual position with a pointing hand, which is not a traditional Buddhist position. Further, the image is placed outdoors, not inside a monastery or a temple. A consecrated Buddha image is traditionally placed at a monastery, inside a rectangular pillared hall (*vihan*) or ordination hall (*ubosot*). By comparison, Chiang Tung's Standing Buddha is placed on a hill, expressly so that it can be seen from all over the town. Therefore, people cannot avoid looking at the image. Another negatively perceived aspect is that the image was constructed in the tradition of

³⁵ For the details of this legend, see Sai Long Seng Lung, *Precise History of Tong Karasi: Four Hermits Creators of the Kengtung Region* (Kengtung: Khun Cultural and Literature Society of Kengtung, 1997); and Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle*.

³⁶ Mangrai, *The Padaeng Chronicle*; and Sommai Premchit and Donald K. Swearer, "A Translation of Tamnan Mulasasana Wat Pa Daeng: The Chronicle of the Founding of Buddhism of the Wat Pa Daeng tradition," *Journal of the Siam Society* 65,2 (1977): 82–85.

³⁷ Asking questions of local people about controversial and political matters poses some risk for the locals. It is problematic in a country like Myanmar to confirm how widespread this opinion is. It is, therefore, impossible actually to know if this is a common perception.

Burmese visual culture, with a symbolic connection to King Mindon and Burmese nationalism. Local people know that the image was made recently by Burmese authorities, and it is easy for people to see that the image is of a foreign shape. Therefore, local people do not interact with the outdoor standing Buddha if they can avoid it, especially since there is a rumor that it was not consecrated through established practice.

There are many similarities between the Standing Buddha at Chiang Tung and the Pointing Buddha at Mandalay, and I argue that the Standing Buddha at Chiang Tung represent Burmese national Buddhism and ethnic-religious identity. The Standing Buddha in Chiang Tung and the Shwedagon Pagoda at Tachilek are emblems of Burmese identity, and also representative of the Burmese military government because those structures are connected with Burmese history and were built by the military regime, whose active support of Buddhism is part of an attempt to achieve political legitimacy (not unlike ancient Burmese rulers' motivations). Constructing sacred buildings and statues is a traditional way for rulers in Buddhist societies to establish legitimacy and to acquire merit in this life or the next. In conclusion, the destruction of symbols of Shan and Tai Khun independence (such as the Chiang Tung palace) and the construction of sacred buildings and statues connected to Burmese ethnic-religious identity are examples of the Burmanization of minorities.

BUDDHA IMAGES AS EMBLEMS OF ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

To better understand the way Buddhist visual culture serves as a marker of ethnic-religious identity, it is important to look closely at the history of Buddhism, at the uniqueness of Buddhist visual culture, and at the genuineness of a Buddha statue.

Religious visual culture is an important factor in the spread of religions throughout the world, and whenever Buddhism has spread from one region to another, visual culture has been an important part of its transnational development and the success of its mission. From the beginning, Buddhist religious tradition was the product of a shared sacred Indian culture with sacred auspicious signs, local deities, and mythological creatures, and it interacted with different belief systems and cultural expressions.³⁸ Buddhist tradition has always been in a state of flux, and as Buddhism spread among different cultures throughout the Asian continent, it adopted many indigenous cultural manifestations. This adaptation to local customs eventually merged Buddhist tradition with ethnic identity, making them nearly inseparable, and resulting in the creation of local and national Buddhist traditions. This can be seen in the Buddhist expansion in China, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.

While Buddhism today is a worldwide movement, it also consists of different national *sanghas* that remain under the authority of national governments, leading to an apparent opposition between a transnational Buddhism with universal lessons and national Buddhism with ethnic and nationalistic tendencies.³⁹ This opposition

³⁸ Klemens Karlsson, *Face to Face with the Absent Buddha: The Formation of Buddhist Aniconic Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1999), pp. 174–78, 187–92; and Klemens Karlsson, "The Formation of Early Buddhist Visual Culture," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 2,1 (2006): 68–95.

³⁹ Thomas Borchert, "Buddhism, Politics, and Nationalism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries," *Religion Compass* 1,5 (2007): 529–46; and Thomas Borchert, "Worry for the Dai

can be clearly recognized in Buddhist art and visual culture, which, while it functions as a uniting force and is important to the spread of Buddhism, is also a kind of emblem of ethnic and religious identity and part of a process of enclosing and excluding peoples. Thus, the unique style of sacred art in the Eastern Shan State is a form of imagining and expressing a Tai Khun identity, especially in relation to the Burmese. Conversely, Burmese Buddhist art set up in the Shan State serves as a marker and emblem of Burmese identity.

It is told that the Buddha, after his awakening, traveled far with his disciples in the region of the Ganges, preaching the *dhamma* and visiting different communities. As we have seen, it is also told that the Buddha visited places in Southeast Asia by traveling through the sky using his supernatural powers. The sacred biography of the Buddha continues after his death in the shape of images. As described by Schober, the rituals and myths of the Mahāmuni Buddha place local context and actors within a universal Buddhist cosmology and establish a continuing biography of the Buddha in the Buddhist polities of Arakan and Upper Burma.⁴⁰ As the Mahāmuni statue was brought from Arakan to Mandalay and installed there as a palladium, so was, implicitly, the Buddha himself, in the form of the Mahāmuni, arguably as a symbolic captive of King Bodawpaya. Much later, the image, and, figuratively, the Buddha, were copied and installed in Chiang Tung.

Throughout the Buddhist history of Southeast Asia, Buddha images have traveled far and wide according to political circumstances, for rulers and conquerors needed Buddha images as tokens of legitimacy.⁴¹ There are numerous examples of how important Buddha images have been captured in conflicts and installed in new capitals to legitimize the conqueror. The Prabang Buddha has been moved several times between Bangkok and Luang Prabang, and the famous Emerald Buddha has also been the subject of political conflicts before becoming a protector figure of the Thai people.⁴² Such highly venerated Buddha images have often been used as emblems of political power and ethnic identity, and these images have become part of an ethnic-religious symbolic network. The Prabang Buddha has become intimately connected with Lao identity, the Emerald Buddha with Thai identity, and the Mahāmuni Buddha with Burmese identity. As with the Mahāmuni, there are several other stories told all over the Buddhist world about Buddha images made during the lifetime of the Buddha. These stories give good reason for the popular practice of venerating the Buddha through his contemporary visual manifestations.

One reason why some images have been regarded as more sacred than others is the occurrence of miraculous events, and there is almost always an extraordinary history connected to these highly venerated images. It is also important to consider the manufacturing and consecration of Buddha images, specifically when a Buddha image is to be considered as a true Buddha, whether when manufactured or only after its consecration. Donald K. Swearer has studied the rituals performed during

Nation: Sipsongpanna, Chinese Modernity, and the Problems of Buddhist Modernism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67,1 (2008): 107–42.

⁴⁰ Schober, "In the Presence of the Buddha."

⁴¹ Stanley J. Tambiah, "Famous Buddha Images and the Legitimation of Kings: The Case of the Sinhala Buddha (*Phra Sihing*) in Thailand," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 4 (1982): 5–19.

⁴² Frank E. Reynolds, "The Holy Emerald Jewel: Some Aspects of Buddhist Symbolism and Political Legitimation in Thailand and Laos," in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1978), pp. 175–93.

the construction and consecration of Buddha images, and, based on his research in northern Thailand, he points out that the rituals are made to infuse *dhamma* into the images in such a way that an image can represent the living presence of the Buddha in the same way as a relic.⁴³ The transformation of power to a newly constructed image involves the use of sacred threads that connect the copy to an already consecrated image, and in the extension back to the expected original first image of the Buddha.⁴⁴ It is believed that a Buddha image that has not been part of a consecration ritual is only a lifeless object, lacking the sacredness of a consecrated image. However, the ritual connected to the manufacturing of an image, described by Alexandra de Mersan, points to the fact that ritualized construction itself can give the image its sacred power.⁴⁵



Figure 5: Buddha image with sacred threads, Chiang Rai, northern Thailand.
Photograph by Klemens Karlsson

⁴³ Donald K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Ordinary white cotton threads are commonly used to transfer sacred power from one object to another or from one person to another. See Figure 5 and Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, fig. 18–20.

⁴⁵ Alexandra de Mersan, "'The Land of the Great Image' and the Test of Time: The Making of Buddha Images in Arakan (Burma/Myanmar)," in this volume.

There are similarities, but also differences, between the Mahāmuni Buddha and the more recently made Standing Buddha at Chiang Tung. Both are extraordinarily large and conspicuous, and both are connected to the lifetime of the Buddha, but also to Burmese national pride and history of conquest. The most prominent difference lies in the history behind their construction. The Mahāmuni copy was made during a relatively prosperous period in Shan history, when the Shan enjoyed relative independence from British interference, and creating the copy may have been an attempt by the local ruler to legitimize himself as a representative of the Tai Khun and Shan people of Chiang Tung. The image may be regarded as a symbol of Burmese ethnic-religious identity, but the statue is not as controversial to local people as is the more recently constructed Standing Buddha. The Standing Buddha's appeal is compromised because it was made by the Burmese military government, arguably to express Burmese Buddhist identity and, in a symbolical way, to keep an eye on the people of Chiang Tung. The political dimensions of both statues are demonstrated by the fact that high-ranking generals and government administrators of the Burmese regime frequently pay homage to Mahāmuni and the Khemarattha Buddha because of the connection these statues have with Burmese identity, whereas old traditional Tai Khun monasteries, such as Wat Padaeng and Wat In, are less favored by Burmese officials.

These two statues illustrate how Buddha images function, how they differ, why some are treated with more respect than others, and what role Buddhist visual culture plays as a marker of ethnic-religious identity. The Mahāmuni image serves as an illustration of the concept that some Buddha images are more sacred than others because they have a special connection to the Buddha himself and are part of the sacred history of Buddhism. Thus, the principal reason for a Buddha image to be conceived as more sacred than others and as an effective emblem of ethnic identity is its authenticity. The image is supposed to be connected to the Buddha and to present an authentic likeness of him. Correspondingly, both of the images under consideration have specific connections with the Buddha through legend.

CONCLUSION

Visual culture is an important part of a living religious tradition, with veneration of sacred images being a form of spiritual motion in individuals that allows them to connect with the sacred. Visual culture can instigate the movement of people, both in relation to sacred sites and to one another, and it is also important to the popularity, and hence the spread, of religions. This may be especially true of Buddhism, for its expansion across Asia was marked by adaptation to local cultures in order to enhance its appeal among local people. Thus, Buddhist visual culture differs from place to place according to ethnic environment, leading to different material traditions even among ethnic groups that follow the same textual tradition. Adopting indigenous cultural manifestations merged local Buddhist visual culture with ethnic identity and, as a consequence, with politics and nationalism.

Some Buddha images are considered more sacred than others, often because of legendary connections to the life of the Buddha. Such images have been used to legitimize political power, and so have repeatedly been captured in wars and venerated by victorious rulers. Through such geopolitical motion, images acquire symbolical meaning, connecting them with a certain political authority or ethnic

group. Religious images and visual culture are useful in validating the history of a people. For these reasons, Buddha images can serve to express local and national Buddhism and to convey ethnic identity.

This is the case in the Eastern Shan State, where Buddhist art and visual culture serve as markers of ethnic-religious identity in the conflict between the Burmese government and the Shan minority, despite the fact that Buddhism of the Theravāda tradition is dominant both among the Burmese and the Shan. This division is exemplified by the two Burmese Buddhas in Chiang Tung, situated in the middle of the Tai Khun cultural area. They establish links with sacred Buddhist history and with the Buddha himself, as they each have a mythical history connected to the historical Buddha. They also establish links with Burmese history and with Burmese ethnic-religious identity, because they are connected to significant royal rulers and important events in Burmese history. Both statues must thus be considered part of the Burmanization process, but as the Mahāmuni Buddha was made on the order of a local ruler during the colonial period, it enjoys greater acceptance among the locals than does the Standing Buddha, which was constructed during the last fifteen years by the (pragmatic) military government.

The connection with Burmese history and the symbolic control of the Mahāmuni image by Burmese military, manifested by the name of the present military commander on the baldachin, do not prevent local Tai Khun visitors from paying homage to the image. The authenticity of the image derives from the belief that it was the Buddha himself who breathed life into it. The image is therefore regarded as especially sacred, and to be sitting in front of it is like being in the presence of the Buddha himself. As the Mahāmuni image was made by the local Tai Khun ruler during a time when the Shan States enjoyed a measure of independence as British protectorates, and from that time been an important part of the religious life of Chiang Tung, ethnic Tai Khun Buddhists will almost certainly continue to venerate the image, especially since the image has a connection to the historical Buddha himself. Important, too, is that the Mahāmuni Board of Pagoda Trustees still remains in the hands of the Tai Khun, not the Burmese.

The Khemaratta Standing Buddha represents Burmese national Buddhism and Burmese ethnic-religious identity in a more distinct way. Local people avoid interacting with the Standing Buddha because it was not created according to local traditions. They know that the image was made recently by the Burmese authorities, the same authorities that destroyed the palace of Chiang Tung, and it is also easy for them to see that the image is of a foreign shape.

The Standing Buddha, and to a lesser extent the Mahāmuni, represents Burmese national Buddhism and Burmese ethnic-religious identity, and the Standing Buddha, especially, is an attempt by the government to legitimize its rule in this minority area. The images thus act as emblems of Burmese hegemony and Burmese nationalism, in a continuing process of Burmanization, especially of minority areas, as a way of manifesting the government's dominance over and subordination of ethnic culture and religion.