

The Mobility of Theravadin Buddhist Monks in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region

Abstract

In the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, the monk is a central figure in enabling people to generate good karma by donating food on the morning rounds, in addition to activities based in the wat (temple). The mobility of monks, therefore, is an important issue and has, historically, been evident throughout the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, where there were no formal state barriers prior to the European colonization period and many porous borders continue to exist. However, the post-colonial period has been characterized by a series of repressive state regimes that have sought to limit the mobility of monks, in particular, as well as imposing other forms of social control. This paper uses an ethnographic approach to understanding the nature of monk mobility in the research area and the issues arising from it. Monks must behave in an entirely ethical manner but, it is shown, they still have some scope to compromise with the constraints placed upon them according to the concept of everyday political behaviour – that is, choosing how to comply with restrictions in ways which are conversant with spiritual and practical goals.

Keywords:

Greater Mekong Sub-Region, monkhood, Theravadin Buddhism, travel,

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1. Introduction

Four countries of the western Mekong region, namely Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, are united by the Theravadin Buddhism that is professed by the majority of their populations. Theravadin Buddhism is one of the three principal branches of Buddhism, alongside Mahayana and Vajrayana. Sri Lanka, from where it spread to Southeast Asia by sea, is the other main place where it is practiced, although it has internationalized through the diaspora of people who have fled persecution of various types. Theravadin Buddhism is itself subject to various sects but is characterized as a whole by the emphasis placed on the role of the monk as a leader in society and on the role of doing good works as a means of gaining karma as part of the effort to obtain enlightenment. These two factors combine to produce societies in which temples – wats – are very prominent parts of the landscape and people will seek out monks to donate food to them on their daily rounds. Men and boys entering the monkhood on a temporary basis to mark important periods of transition in their lives is also a common feature. Monks are very noticeable members of society by virtue of their brightly-coloured gold or saffron robes, their shaved heads and the physical space demarcated around them and respected by all people so that the monk will never have to touch a woman. By contrast, in Mahayana societies it is quite possible for monks to mingle with lay people, perform salaried jobs and so forth in ways which would be considered inappropriate in the Theravadin context.

Relations between the four Mekong region countries have often been problematic both in history and in recent years. Cambodia and Thailand have been at daggers drawn over the PreahVihear temple complex controversy which has been manufactured by Thai ultra-nationalists hoping for a border war to erupt so as to provide a pretext for another military coup. Myanmar and Thailand have seen skirmishes at various parts of the long border sparked most commonly by the presence of contending armed groups, including the Burmese military forces, the *tatmadaw*. The presence of hundreds of thousands of unregistered migrant workers crossing the borders clandestinely and having to contend with various forms of authority operating on a cash basis also has provoked problems. Combined with the baleful effects of Mekong nationalism and the tendency of educational systems to focus on learning English and western systems to the detriment of any awareness of the neighbours also contributes to the low level of mutual understanding among people. Is it possible, under these circumstances, for religion-motivated cross-border exchanges to improve or in some way

positively affect relations between communities across borders? This is the first of the research questions considered in this paper.

The second research question challenges the dominant mode of discourse within the Mekong region and, indeed, Southeast Asia as a whole. Led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Southeast Asian region has entered a period of non-interventionism across borders on political and cultural grounds that means only commercial or economic relationships are being meaningfully considered from an organizational or state level of discourse. As a result, disembedded from all of its social and cultural accompaniments, economic market-based transactions are revealed to be a form of cowboy capitalism in which the creative destruction of capitalism is not tempered by any mechanisms for taking care of the losers while restraining the excesses of the winners created by this process. The result of this is land-grabbing, creation of para-states and the complete sequestration of the commons by private interests. Under these circumstances, is it possible that cross-border religious exchanges can and do mediate capitalism in the region studied? If positive effects can be discerned, this prompts the subsidiary issue of how such effects may be intensified and spread geographically and deepened to more members and institutions of society.

This paper reports on research conducted by different members of the SIU Research Centre as part of a larger project aimed at understanding broad flows of cross-border transactions in different dimensions linking Thailand and her neighbours. Qualitative approaches were used and featured both personal, face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings. These were accompanied by ethnographic observation of religious exchanges in practice. Research encounters, which were conducted in a variety of languages, were either recorded by electronic means or captured by extensive note-taking and subsequently transcribed and interpreted when required into English for inclusion in a database that was subsequently interrogated according to recognized content analysis techniques. The results are described here and in a number of papers still in production.

This paper now continues with a consideration of the different ways in which religion-motivated cross-border exchanges takes place, then continues with an attempt to delineate the effects of the different types of exchange and the prospects they offer for improving cross-border relationships in the western Mekong region.

2. Mobility

As an area of scholarly inquiry, mobility has traditionally been linked with distance, in that people as individuals will exhibit a degree of rationality in being efficient with their movement by limiting the distance travelled (e.g. Ravenstein, 1889; Stouffer, 1940). Such an approach makes intuitive sense in a world in which travel is arduous and may even be physically dangerous. It fits the historical record of people rarely moving far from their place of birth and, when they did move, it was from duress such as forced portage, conscription or migration due to some natural disaster. Indeed, when people have travelled for spiritual purposes, as part of a pilgrimage, the sense of possible danger can be an important element in heightening the virtue to be obtained (Nordin, 2011). For the historical Buddha, before the period of his ministry, he was accompanied by a charioteer to assist with security and, later, had the ability to calm and befriend wild animals, thereby ensuring his own safety. However, the modern world gives us agency over our own actions (Giddens, 1991) and mobility is one area where this is certainly true.

Travel has become significantly easier because of the spread of transportation infrastructure, budget air travel and simplification of cross-border procedures. It is still possible to find places where local travel is onerous but it is likely to be the case that moving from one hub to another is convenient in relative terms. In the age of globalization, the hyper-developed world has followed what Marx once called the annihilation of space by time, that is, it combines power-relations and space-time in a way that greatly extends the capitalist world view across borders previously unbreached (Massey, 1999). This has perhaps been most obvious in the

case of labour migration. The number of people now travelling domestically and internationally has become enormous and the remittances that result from it are of significant importance to the national income of countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines. If, as Rushdie (1992) observed, the migrant has become "... the central or defining figure of the twentieth century," then perhaps the labour migrant occupies the same role in the twenty-first century. In recent years, the nature of labour migration has changed in that it has become much more possible and likely that women will be involved, not as victims but with agency to find work and thereby help to recreate family relations from a different perspective. On many occasions but not all, this involves the creation of an international chain of care, in which migrant women care for other women's children while their own children are cared for by family members. With the development of cheap mobile telecommunications and internet tools, it is now possible for women to keep in touch with close family members and maintain relationships to a reasonable level and at a reasonable cost while living away from home. In other words, the arduous aspects of mobility have been mostly removed.

2.2. Mobility in the GMSR

The GMSR has witnessed movement throughout history. Movement has included the large-scale migration of the Tai peoples after the destruction of Nanchao kingdom in what is now Yunnan province of China down to the creation of individual traders and trade networks joining the different communities together. Owing to the difficult geography and the historically low level of population throughout the region, the role of individuals in enhancing trade and communications has always been important. In addition, many of the peoples of the region have not had a fixed position. This has resulted from geopolitical forces over which they have had little control – for example, the Kuomintang faction who moved into northern Thailand after their defeat in the Chinese Civil War and the refugees from the Indochinese wars and Communist revolutions in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia – or else because their lifestyle calls them to participate in shifting patterns of swidden agriculture. When left to their own devices, swidden agriculturalists are able to maintain a sustainable system but they have in a number of cases suffered interventions from government agencies or hostile local groups who have obliged them to adopt different and less sustainable lifestyles.

Mobility in the region is also associated with acts of war, which have led to the creation of many thousands of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). Owing to the fighting in Kachin State, where the Kachin Independence Army and the Kachin Independence Organization have been attempting to obtain autonomy, there are reportedly around 100,000 IDPs in the State and nearly 650,000 people in total in the country (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2016). To these must be added the many thousands of Rohingya people forced out of their homes to live in Bangladesh and elsewhere as a result of assault by the military forces of Myanmar (McPherson, 2017). Mobility of this sort has few if any positive connotations. However, it is reminiscent of the situation viewed by Urry (2000:1) of "... the development of various global 'networks and flows' undermines endogenous social structures which have generally been taken within sociological discourse to possess the powers to reproduce themselves." These are mixed, agglomerated social groups, in other words, which cannot be identified and essentialized but which will evolve and change in ways which are not amenable to the discourses of the social sciences of the global north. Virilio reinforces the point when he adds the technological perspective to the argument: "The *conjunctive proximity* of continental territorial development is totally superseded by the *disjunctive precariousness* of worldwide time-management practices that provoke a sort of disintegration in the socio-political organization we have inherited from past centuries (2008:86, emphasis in original)." An integral part of this perhaps disordered system is taken by Theravadin Buddhist monks of the region, whose very presence is capable of transforming mundane or profane space into sacred space through their ability to generate virtue. The following section indicates the different ways in which monks demonstrate mobility on the region.

3. Religion-Motivated Cross Border Exchanges in the Western Mekong Region

The first distinction to make when considering religion-motivated cross-border movements in the region under study is between monks and the laity – the status of women as ordained religious figures is problematic and will be considered separately later. Monks can travel both to provide and to receive religious services, while the laity can travel to receive religious services but may also be able to travel to facilitate the production and receipt of services of this nature. Since the definition of a service involves its creation and receipt, it may be said that without their presence, the laity would not permit the monks to provide religious services which benefit, perhaps in an asymmetrical way, all partners involved.

3.1. Monks as Travelers

Monks travel across borders both to give and to receive religious services. Since karma is generated by individual actions and, for geographical and historical reasons, people are unequally distributed across the western Mekong region, it follows that some places are more suitable for pilgrimage than others. Places which are propitious in this context attract monks, donations and temple construction, which further intensifies the unevenness of development. However, this is mediated in the region under study by the longstanding practices of animism. Perhaps predating the spread of Buddhism, animism posits that local communities are intricately and intensively linked with spirits inhabiting local phenomena (e.g. trees, water sources or weather phenomena) which must be propitiated or rewarded so as to ensure seasonal practices or human relationships proceed smoothly. As a result, just about every part of the region which has or has had a human community contains the seeds of an important place of religious pilgrimage. As Kitiarsa (2012) showed, it can be the agency of an individual person (whether conscious of this or not) that changes a previously little regarded site into one of significant religious importance.

Monks face the problem of practical travel difficulties in the western Mekong. Despite the spread of transparency in such dealings and freedom to move, crossing borders in the region can still be problematic if approached from a purely ethical perspective – it would not be possible for a monk to travel unofficially (i.e. illegally) across borders, especially for a religious purpose without destroying the good karma that might be generated by such a trip and expedient short-term disrobing is not acceptable. Yet passports can be expensive to obtain and require a great deal of time to receive through official channels. Short-term official papers are permitted to the laity but are somewhat contradictory to the purpose of a monk in such cases, who may have taken precepts to avoid handling money and who may not require such ephemeral cross-border access. In the best of cases, a monk with a passport may freely travel between Thailand, Laos and Cambodia for up to one month without a visa. Travelling to Myanmar has been more problematic, requiring a visa to date, although the opening of that county may lead to reductions in the bureaucracy of travel in due course. Cross-border movement is not assisted by the suspicion with which monk travel is considered by some states. Laos, for example, remains a Communist state under the political leadership of the Pathet Lao which is officially antithetical to religion and the monkhood and continues to place some restrictions on religious practice. The state of Myanmar, whether genuinely being democratized or not, nevertheless retains a potent memory of protesting monks and, in an environment in which removal of the repressive jackboot has led to the etiolation of ethnic and religious rivalries which have exploded into violence. The repression of monks in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period is indicative of the potential that the sangha (the organization of ordained monks) has for concerned social protests even if it has regularly been divided between obedience and dissent. The relationship between monks and the state has also been problematic in Laos. After the Communist revolution in 1975, some attempts were made to end the institution of monkhood altogether but the attachment to it among the population at general was sufficiently strong that this attempt was ultimately abandoned. However, official antagonism remained and a number of activities are prohibited or at least made more difficult.

The tudong tradition is one such area where antagonistic relations between monks and the state in Laos are revealed. The phratudong tradition involves monks living most of their lives

outside of civilization, in the forests or mountains where few people ever travel. Monks following this lifestyle spend most of their time meditating and are considered to be able to reach high levels of sanctitude through this lifestyle. Monks would travel from Thailand to Laos to liaise with the tudong monks who follow a prearranged schedule such that they return to their designated wat on a periodic basis. Monks at LuangPrabang have a particularly potent reputation in this regard. Certain wats have a reputation for being home to known tudong monks and, together with good living conditions including the milder climate, attract the Thai monks who wish to meditate there. The knowledge and wisdom that they can obtain from this is brought back and put to the service of people and monks attending the home wat.

Monks might also travel across borders as part of organized study tours or as part of knowledge conservation projects. For example, a group of monks from Myanmar have been brought to Thailand as part of a project involving Oxford University personnel who are intent on digitizing an archive of Buddhist texts that were originally written in Pali but using Burmese characters. It is part of the modernization of Buddhism to recognize that the impermanence of cultural productions can be a barrier to spreading the news of the philosophy to other people in different parts of the world.

3.2. Monks as Hosts

Monks may act as hosts for cross-border travel, either as providers of religious services or as facilitators for organizing accommodation and subsistence. When monks travel, they do so in a low-cost manner but still require some support in terms of space and basic physical requirements. Many monks prefer to travel to Thailand to study, particularly specialized Buddhist studies at the post-graduate level because of the availability of such courses in Thailand but also because the higher standard of living available there mean that there are more people able and willing to donate to wats and thereby support the scholar monks. Since there are so many wats in the region that do not have properly educated monks to take care of them – it is believed that around half of the approximately 30,000 wats in Thailand do not have monks assigned to them, for example, and there are insufficient numbers of monks in this context in all the countries studied – the advanced education of monks is considered to be an important subject. Unfortunately, cross-border requirements make it difficult for the monks to obtain student visas prior to arriving in Thailand and so they are obliged to travel on a tourist visa and then change their status later. This is a problematic approach.

4. Discussion

In theory at least, any person could become a Buddhist monk and, in the GMSR, many men do so at some part of their lives. Monks can transform space by making the profane sacred through their own actions and these complement the idea of the annihilation of space by time. While globalization offers the apparent ability to render all space homogeneous, monks provide the reverse process, bringing the numinous out from the everyday. This is emphasized by influential reformer BuddhadasaBhikku, who has stated: "... the fruits of the supramundane *lokattura* path are unrealizable without being founded on the mundane level of activity (Jackson, 2013:145). In other words, the monk must be able to live as a layperson in order to achieve the goal of nirvana. The superstructure of belief, it might then be argued, rests on the base of production in the Theravadin world order. The mobility of monks, therefore, has a facilitating role in making these transformations possible for people in different areas and, also, reinforces the lay part of their own nature by enduring tedium and discomfort when moving from one place to another. This mobility also allows laypeople to experience more fully the sacred aspect of their lives, should they so desire, for at least a temporary period. This view offers some agency to local people who might otherwise be considered victims of globalization. Influential scholars of mobility-related issues run the risk of portraying local people, communities and institutions as being powerless victims being expelled from the globalized world (Sassen, 2016) or else entirely consumed as a result (Sheller, 2003).

The sacred life offers a more complex and intricate relationship between space and time. It offers the opportunity to remove the burden on the brains of the living represented by the memory of the past. This does not mean that the nightmare ceases to exist but it does, at least potentially, become a phenomenon which will no longer have power over the individual.

The mobility of monks can also represent an extension to the influence of the state as well as a new means of challenging it. Monks will normally obey the laws of the land, in addition to the numerous regulations which govern every aspect of their lives. However, there are occasions when disobedience of the law can be justified. For example, writing about the self-immolation of the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc, Thich Nhat Hanh observed:

“The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire nonexistence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and helpful and aspires for something good in the future (Phuong, 2018).”

It is the intention of the concerned monk, that is, that determines whether destruction of the flesh is suicide or a conscious, virtuous activity. Mobility significantly enlarges the range of activities and circumstances under which such decisions may be made.

In practical terms, monk mobility has provided numerous opportunities for lay and clergy together to raise interest in sacred matters, to conduct consciousness raising activities and jointly educating those with an open mind and an interest in learning. These activities may be declared a definite good – at least from the non-Theravadin perspective – in their own right irrespective of the intention behind it. They also generate virtue for the participants which might also be distributed to others according to the will of the original recipient. Space might be annihilated by time but it can also spring from the void once more.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored issues relating to the mobility of Theravadin monks in the GMSR. It has been found that there are sacred and mundane reasons why monks might wish to travel across borders and that their ability to do so has increased considerably as the result of improved infrastructure and levels of agreement between neighbouring governments. Enhanced mobility has meant that the relationship between space and time and between the sacred and the mundane have become increasingly complex and intricate. While many depictions of globalization envisage the incorporation of local practices into transnational assemblages beyond their power to control, monk mobility helps preserve a measure of agency for local people.

It is clear that there is a need to extend the current research to incorporate more instances and types of interaction. Mobility requires and establishes interactions that bring meaning to the space-time, lay-clergy, sacred-mundane dyads and allow them to enter the lives of local people and communities. It seems to redefine the structure of communities and the relationships between them in unexpected ways but ways which might offer unexpected benefits.

6. References

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