

A way of Negotiating with the other within the self: Muslim's acknowledgement of Buddhist ancestors in Southern Thailand

Nishii Ryoko

Introduction

In the area of Muslim-Buddhist co-residence on the west coast of Southern Thailand, it is possible to observe a ritual with mixed religious elements: the ordination of Muslims as a Buddhist monk or nun at a Buddhist monastery. Why would Muslims do this? How do they justify this act, which is religiously a sin? When asked about this participants and native observers had no problem coming up with a response. The common answer, "she/he was possessed by lineage of Buddhist (thuk chwasai phut)", however, lead to further investigation.

I found this phrase rather odd. While chwasai usually refers to the relationship between the self and self's own ancestor, it also connotes things that belong to the self. But the term possessed (thuk) relates to being in the grip of an extreme other from outside the self. I cite Majima's statement on possession, "the idiom of possession is a way of referring to the unexplained sense of an otherness to a self. Or could be described as an metaphor used for experience of a self that is based on otherness (Majima 1997: 112)." The juxtaposition of these two words - one, "chwasai", concerned with that which is most familiar one to the self and the other, 'possessed', concerned with an otherness estranged from the self - struck me as odd. What brings the self into relation with the most estranged conception of the self? This paper treats this question. Asking this question also leads us to consideration of how lineage is related to kinship in a society with 'genealogical amnesia'.

Genealogical amnesia in Southeast Asia and cognatic kinship in the village

Early anthropologists lamented that Southeast Asian people who forget their ancestors had been afflicted with 'genealogical amnesia'. Most of these societies are cognatic. Because kinship is reckoned in a non-unilineal way, it makes it difficult to trace the descent of individuals in a simple manner from an ancestor. Using the term with a positive implication, Hildred and Clifford Geertz have characterized the Balinese as having 'genealogical amnesia'. This gives them organizational flexibility: "corporate descent groups among Balinese commoners are free to expand or contract their memberships readily in response to changing circumstances" (Geertz 1964: 94). Errington also made use the term of 'genealogical amnesia' when explaining how some Southeast Asian people relate to the past (Errington 1989: 203-231).

In the same vein, a recent article by Carsten has pointed out that "References to an absence of knowledge of ancestors are a more or less standard feature of ethnographies of cognatic societies in Southeast Asia" (Carsten 1995: 324). Carsten's fieldwork was conducted in northern Malaysia at Langkawi, just across the border Thai-Malaysian border from my research site. For the people she studied, kinship relations are reckoned 'horizontally', in terms of siblingship, rather than 'vertically', in terms of descent (ibid.: 319). More succinctly, in kinship, people stress siblingship rather than filiation (ibid.: 325). Rather than a symptom of defective memory, 'genealogical amnesia' can thus be seen as more a case of privileging intimate and detailed knowledge of ties of

siblingship (Carsten 1997: 272). Carsten's conclusion about genealogical amnesia has the same positive implications as the Geertz's. There is a tendency for differences in origin to be in the process of conversion into similarity; differences are best forgotten. At the same time, relatives who are no longer significant are forgotten (Carsten 1995: 330). She also suggests that the lack of concern with recall can be linked to comparatively widespread demographic mobility in the region: "when people are highly mobile, then it may be more important to create kinship out of new ties than to remember ancestors whose identity has become largely irrelevant" (Carsten 1997: 273).

I carried out my own field research in a village in Southern Thailand, in which kinship reckoning is typically cognatic: close relatives are paternal or maternal according to circumstances. Among 159 couples in the village in 1988, 44% lived patrilocally after marriage and 36% matrilocally, while 20% had taken up neolocal residence. Close kinship is not bestowed by belonging to a descent group based on a genealogy traced from a specific ancestor, rather it is reckoned in a kindred way by recognizing categories of bilateral kin, which may extend only to a certain degree of relationship from ego.

In the village the term for kin is *yat phi norng* or often merely *yat* or *phi norng*. According to a Thai-Thai dictionary, *yat* refers to, "people who are recognized as kin on either paternal or maternal side": *phi norng* initially refers to, "brothers and sisters who share the same parents", and it may further be extended in meaning to cover a wider category of people "who share some kind of kinship relation". Both terms include bilateral relatives. As a term signifying a category of people with whom the speaker has a certain degree relationship, *yat phi norng* shows some elasticity of inclusiveness depending on the situation. When I asked a villager to set a limit for *yat phi norng*, she answered, "people who can respect each other: if not, they are the same as outsiders". The emphasis that Carsten found on siblingship and its elasticity in Lankawi, seems to be similarly strong over the border in southern Thailand.

Carsten stresses that similarity of attributes and substance of Lankawi kinship which is created both in the present and the future through the absorption and homogenization of difference. In southern Thailand, however, this approach to kinship has to be a challenging difference that cannot be ignored. People fall into exclusive categories of religious affiliation.

Intermarriages between Muslims and Buddhists

To create kinship where it was not previously acknowledged, Carsten has emphasized the importance of sharing of food and living space (Carsten 2000: 18). Religious differences severely hinder this kind of sociality. People of different religions usually cannot live in the same house. In interreligious marriages, one of the partners has to convert. It is commonly said that "husband and wife must be of the same religion." Even so, the rate of intermarriage in the village is very much higher than in other areas in the region with both Muslim and Buddhist populations. In the village about 20% of marriage are unions between Muslims and Buddhists, whereas in Malaysia, [[Winzeler] this spelling or the one below?] recorded only 5 mixed marriages out of 161 (3.1%), and Chavivun reported few intermarriages in Pattani on the east coast of Southern Thailand (Winzeler 1985:116-117; Chavivun 1982: 79-80).

Elsewhere in this border region intermarriages, which are rare, are not commonly accompanied by conversion of one of the partners. At other places on the east coast of Southern Thailand or in northern Malaysia, in the few reported cases of conversion connected with

intermarriage, the Buddhist has always converted to Islam. In the frequency of intermarriage, the acceptability of conversion, and the fact that the conversion can go either way, Islam to Buddhism or Buddhism to Islam, this village is highly distinctive.

How are partners recognized Buddhists or Muslims after intermarriage? Buddhists are regarded as Muslims when they convert to Islam by *shahada* (reciting the words of faith). If the Buddhist partner does not recite the words of faith, the other partner is regarded as a Buddhist. In other words, the religious boundary is delineated only by reference to Islam. In daily life, villagers usually regard those who go to mosque as Muslims and those who go to temple as Buddhists. After marriage, converts cannot live with their parents who are of different religion. This religious boundary limits the elasticity of cognatic kinship relations.

Satsana and Phasa

In daily life, even after conversion due to intermarriage, however, converts can maintain contact with their parental families who are, subsequent to marriage and conversion, of a different religion. For example, a female convert from Islam living near her parent's house took her children to her parents house almost every day to be left in their care. After conversion, however, there are occasions when religious differences become obvious: the practice of religious rituals.

In the village, there are two terms that can be translated as religion. One is *satsana*, which refers to knowing *bun* (merit) and *pap* (sin). These are human qualities that both Muslims and Buddhists share, in contrast with beasts, which do not know *bun* and *bap*. Another is *phasa*, which refers to the differentiated practices peculiar to each religion. *Phasa* is usually understood as "language" and "speech" in standard Thai. However, in southern Thailand the meaning of *phasa* is explained as custom (*prapheni*), or to do, act, or perform a practice (*patibat*). *Phasa* is commonly used in designating the religious practice of both Muslims, *phasa khaek*, and Buddhists, *phasa thai*. When the word *phasa* is used, it contrastively indicates religious difference. In religious rituals the boundary between Muslims and Buddhists, that is, the difference of *phasa*, becomes apparent. Each side must follow its own religious ways.

Thus, when their parents hold merit-making religious rituals, converts, because they cannot themselves participate, give money to their parents. When a parent dies, instead of making merit for their parents themselves, converts give money to relatives. *Phasa* of merit-making for the deceased should be accorded to the *phasa* followed during life. This recognition can be seen in *kham phi*, a deathbed testament to convert back to one's former religion after death and be given a funeral according to that religion. In most cases it is converts from Islam who make such a testament with the intention of absolving the sin of their conversion. But this is possible only when one or more of the children are Muslims, which would entail having at least one child who had the converted to Islam; normally, the children of intermarriages, in which a partner converted to Buddhism, are brought up as Buddhists.

On the other hand, *chwasai*, the relationship between ancestors and descendants, seems to pass on inheritance of both religions. One person might have both Muslim lineage (*chwasai khaek*) and Buddhist lineage (*chwasai thai*). These lineages do not, however, cohere as groups who share common rights and interests. Lineage remains significant only as because it provides a relationship with ancestors from whom boons may be solicited. In a sense, *phasa* seems to be a differentiated form of religion concerned with relationship to the dead, while *chwasai* seems to be a principal of religious coexistence concerned with relationships to ancestors.

Ancestors in a society of cognatic kinship

The term for ancestor in southern Thailand is ta yai. In standard Thai, ta means maternal grandfather and yai means maternal grandmother. But ta yai here refers to generalized ancestors, not to specific maternal grandparents. Ta yai are not involved in issues concerned with the estates of kin groups the same way as phi pu ya in northern Thailand. Turton has characterized the conceptualization of ancestors in northern Thailand as follows: " (It) is in marked contrast with, say, the well known case of the Tallensi of West Africa whose cosmological and political systems are dominated by ancestor cults and unilineal descent principles" (Turton 1972: 217). If ancestor worship is institutionalized, as in the Tallensi case, the particular line of ancestors that is emphasized not only provides a charter for a social structure ordered on genealogical principles, but these ancestor are also commemorated and propitiated by name (Fortes 1975: 123-124). In northern Thailand, however, a descent group that with a common phi pu ya ancestor is not structurally organized into an exclusive group that confers rights to land or other estate.

In southern Thailand, during the sixth lunar month, some villagers conduct annual ta yai rituals. The ritual consists of making food offering and asking forbears for protection from misfortune and illness. In 1995, seven villagers (four Muslims and three Buddhists) presided over ta yai rituals and conducted events attended by their children and grandchildren. Ta yai are inherited from generation to generation without regard to sex, religion, or order of siblings. Choice is said to depend on the ta yai themselves. Succession becomes apparent when a ta yai causes one of the children to fall ill or lose his or her appetite. In such case, the child may recover after invoking the ta yai and vowing make an offering of food. After this, the ta yai will stay with the child.

Here I would like to point out the difference between dead kin and ta yai. Based on his research in northeast Thailand, Tambiah wrote, "It is believed that when descendants fail to transfer merit to the dead, ancestral spirits cause minor illness such as headache and fever" (Tambiah 1970: 314). Tambiah mentions that all of the spirits of dead kin are believed to be capable of attacking living humans. However, in my research in southern Thailand people never transfer merit to ta yai. The object of their merit transfer is restricted to personally known dead person and does not include ancestors who were not personally known to merit giver. Dead kin who are commemorated by name are not usually believed to afflict living descendants. People make merit for commemorated relatives and, in ritual process at temples, for all dead people who have no relatives (pret), but not for ta yai. It should also be mentioned that it is by no means clear whether ta yai refers to individual ancestors or to an undifferentiated group of ancestors.

For ta yai people asking boon. The difference between the dead and ancestors can be found in the difference in the attitude of the living. The dead are the object of merit transfer (bun) from the living, and ancestors are the objects of requests for boons (bon) from their descendants. The ta yai ritual is also called kae bon by some villagers, which denotes a return for favors.

The context of Chwasai

Chwasai usually refers to the relationship between ancestor and descendant. In dictionaries chwasai is glossed as lineage, (original) stock, or descendants (Tomita 1987, Matsuyama 1994), while chwa means: 1. germ, bacteria; 2. enzyme, ferment, leaven. In compounds it often means agent or essence (Haas 1964). In other words, it conveys the concept of a cause that reproduces previous form and substance (Tomita 1987).

Thus, the relationship between ancestor and descendant, which involves the transmission of form and substance from ancestors to descendants, has *chwasai*. At first glance, it appears as if ancestors in cognatic society share the same principles of kinship which Carsten characterized as sibblingship, marked by similarity and partaking of a common substance. On the other hand, we find that *chwasai* is used in a peculiar context, if we have look carefully to examine the context of the term used. For example, *chwasai* is not used when talking about the ritual of *ta yai*, when religious differences are not involved in inheritance of the ritual and do not complicate the relationship between ancestors and descendants. *Chwasai* is typically used in contexts that contrast religious differences, as in *chwasai khaek* and *chwasai thai*, or *phut*. It is used when describing the taking of orders by a Muslim at a Buddhist monastery.

In fact, the thoughts behind this paper were motivated by the use of *thuk chwasai phut*, "she/he was possessed by lineage of Buddhist", to explain why a Muslim would do such a thing. To me it seemed odd that *chwasai* connotes similarity, yet, in this religious context, functions to emphasize difference. Things will become clearer after considering a few cases of Muslim's ordination at a Buddhist temple in the village where I conducted research.

Cases of Muslim's ordination

Muslim's ordination is regarded to be done for returning a boon granted by Buddhist ancestors. In most cases, when children under three years of age fell ill, their parents believed that ancestors had caused the illness and prayed to the 'Buddhist' ancestors to cure their child. In return for the cure, the child was promised to become a Buddhist monk, novice, or nun. If the child recovered, this would done at around age ten.

In my 1988 survey, fifteen people had undergone this type of ordination. Of these, thirteen were females and had been ordained as nuns, and two were males who had entered the priesthood as novices. Currently, they are aged between 20 and 70. This age range is evidence of that the custom of Muslim's ordination have been practiced for at least the past 60 years. In each case, the Muslims follow the same ritual procedures as for Buddhists: their heads are shaved, the girls wear white robes and the boys yellow. In a photograph I was shown, a Muslim girl was ordained together with a Buddhist girl, but I was told that sometimes Muslims follow the procedures in a special group, separate from Buddhists. Even so, Muslims follow the same ritual process as the Buddhists. The newly ordained stayed at the Buddhist monastery for one night and returned to their secular lives the following day. To be ordained as a Buddhist monks or nuns means to become a Buddhist. Consequently, Muslims ordained as a Buddhist should undergo ritual conversion to Islam after returning to secular life, as Buddhists have to do for converting to Islam.

It is said that the only a single Muslim per family can be ordained, whereas there is no limit for the children from Buddhist families. Moreover, the Muslim who is ordained should be the first-born child. Muslims told me that they did not have their children ordained for merit-making purposes, but to return a boon according to custom. There was also a fear of retribution from Buddhist ancestors if the child was not ordained. Yet, in the 15 instances I recorded, only 4 could trace their Buddhist antecedents. The rest of them said that they must have had Buddhist ancestors in former times. Actually, in many cases the reason given for ordination was that the mother had been a nun. They say, "If the mother was ordained, so must her child." Some people called the lineage "descent of the ordained (*chwa buat*)" or "ordained lineage (*trakun buat*)".

Again it is the successive act of ordination that is emphasized. Antecedents are not traced genealogically to discover a Buddhist ancestor.

This Muslim's ordination can be considered to be a result of intermarriage between Muslims and Buddhists and longstanding co-residence of long period, like the people historically known as Sam Sam, who live in this area and who are reported as having both Muslims and Buddhist traditions. And it is also possible to regard this ritual as a evidence of the relatively unproblematic co-existence of religions here, the history of which I have previously reported (Nishii 1996, 1999). But we need to see the other side of this ritual. Muslims carry out this ritual to extinguish the chwasai that possesses their body. One Muslim female called the Muslim's ordination an act "to extinguish Buddhist lineage (mot chwa)". Another Muslim woman who had been a nun said, "in former times, Muslim parents had to have their first child be ordained. In those days no one knew how to cut off their Buddhist lineage (chwasai phut)." They feel a need to cut off the Buddhist lineage within themselves. Paradoxically, the act itself of cutting off the Buddhist lineage reproduces the same act in the next generation, as "the mother was ordained. So must her child."

We found another way of cutting off the Buddhist lineage by conducting a particular ritual. This is a way of cutting off the Buddhist lineage and avoiding actual ordination in the temple.

Rituals to brake off a boon of ordination

To cope with the custom to offering a child to Buddhism, Muslims practice a peculiar ritual. This ritual is their way of cancelling the obligation consequent to vows made in supplication to Buddhist ancestors. I was able to attend this type of ritual in 1994 at a village near the village central to my fieldwork.

The only person in the district who can preside over this ritual is Leep, who has been doing it for 40 years. In 1994, up to November, he had already performed this ritual five times before the one I attended. Even so, no one in my research village knows about it. For them, the only way to repay a favour solicited by vowing to enter holy orders is to actually fulfill the promise.

People familiar with this ritual say that the only person qualified to conduct is one who can carry out circumcision. Circumcision for Muslims is a very important step in the transition from childhood to adulthood. People say that circumcision is the way "to become a Muslim". Through circumcision, even a child who does not know about religious matters can become an 'adult Muslim' able to perform religious duties. Anyone who has been involved in a vow of ordination in return for a boon and has not yet gone through with it would bleed terribly at circumcision. Thus, before circumcision, that is, before becoming a Muslim adult, a break must be made with the Buddhist lineage. Leep's son, in his 40s, said, "it is necessary to make a break between the two lineages, Muslim and Buddhist. If a ritual of renunciation is not carried out, undesirable effects or an illness such as stomachache or fever are likely to occur."

The ritual that is described below took place on 14 November 1994. The boy who underwent this ritual is Dun, at the time he was 11 years old and attending his 5th year of elementary school.

Dun's mother prepared a white cloth, nine sets of betel nuts and leaves, and 50 baht (ca. USD 2 in May 1995). The ritual took only five minutes, beginning at 8:17 and finishing at 8:22. The ritual was divided into two sections.

In the first part passages from the Yasin section of the Quran were read. Passages from the Yasin are usually read for a dying person or for a corpse before burial. One Muslim explained to me that the purpose of reading from Yasin is to ease the prolonged pain of those who are about to die and to let them die quickly and to ensure the survival of those who are to live. The ritual started with Leep sitting on the floor. In front of him was placed a bowl filled with water and covered with a white cloth, next to which this, a flat dish was laid with areca nuts and betel leaves upon which were placed 50 baht and a candle. Leep lit the candle and then read a passage from the Yasin, touching the water in the bowl with his fingers. After this he instructed Dun to bathe at the well.

In this second phase, Leep brought out to the well the bowl of water covered with a white cloth. He approached Dun, who had already bathed, then he chanted the following phrases three times: "Buddha be cut off, Dharma be cut off, Sangha be cut off, be lost forever, along with the name of Buddha." After this, Leep threw the water, cloth and all, over Dun.

A tentative interpretation of this ritual is possible. The initial reading of the Yasin symbolizes the death of the boy as a Muslim. And in the second section, the white cloth may symbolise the priesthood, as Leep mentioned that a woman who was ordained as a nun wore white robes. Dun is a boy, however, and boys, when they become novices, wear yellow robes. Interpretation aside, when all is said and done, the ritual process of reading from Yasin, chanting, and pouring water through the white cloth is considered effective in cutting off the Buddhist lineage.

Unlike Muslims who have been ordained at a temple, those who undergo this ritual do not need to undergo any special ritual to become Muslim again. They are not considered to have committed any sin as Muslim, unlike those who have been actually ordained at a Buddhist temple.

Conclusion - Negotiating with the other within the self

Strathern has observed that Melanesian society is based on 'perspectivism', that is, social relations are embodied as an integral element of persons (Strathern 1992: 84). "Garia persons are conceptualized as managing their relations with others, they are the equivalent of all the relationships focused on them." They are all homologous persons (ibid.: 82) She compared Western society and Melanesian idea. "Take the individual away and, English would say, society will still endure. But a Melanesian death required the active severance of persons and relations - living persons rearranging their relationships among themselves when the deceased could no longer embody them" (ibid.: 99). In this Melanesian model of personhood and society, relations with others are embodied within the person. In a sense, the 'other' does not exist in this model.

In a recent article's, Deguchi compared Strathern's Garia model with the Karatani's scheme (Deguchi 2002: 447-449). Karatani redefined 'society' as a place of otherness, where no communal transcendent rules and exchange and communication exist. Here we need to make effort to communicate with others by 'fatal leap.' He redefines 'community', however, as the place of sameness where everyone shares a common language and rules of exchange. So, rather than 'society', Deguchi sees in Strathern's model the 'community' of Karatani's model because common rules of exchange are shared. At the same time, Deguchi has pointed out that the models of both Strathern and Karatani lack accomodation for the other in the self: while Karatani posits another outside the self, Strathern's self is always a fructal self or a hierarchical repetition of

sameness. Deguchi argues that these models have no moment whereby 'society' can emerge from inside the self.

I think that the moment of this emergence of 'society' is present in the behavior that leads to the acceptance by Muslims of Buddhist ordination: this act is a way of negotiating the other within the self. As mentioned earlier, I was struck by the strange juxtaposition of terms for close familiarity and distant otherness in the phrase "she/he was possessed by lineage of Buddhist (thuk chwasai phut)", which is uttered to explain why Muslims have been ordained as a Buddhist nuns or monks. While chwasai connotes that which is most familiar to the self, thuk (possessed) refers an otherness to the self. Looking at the context of usage of chwasai made it clear that this term is used in situations in which the difference of religions, phasa, is most conspicuous. The succession of similarity through the lineage might only be apparent only when confronted by the existence of difference. In other words, expansion of the self is enabled only by the existence of others

Here I have considered this issue from the Muslim's ordination in southern Thailand. As one informant put it, "chwasai is not cut off naturally without cutting it (by ordination)" from both sides of religions within the self. Muslims with Buddhist ancestry also embody Buddhist chwasai; in this case, Buddhist chwasai becomes the other within the self. This manifests itself when the Muslim body is not well. Up to then, Muslim chwasai and Buddhist chwasai are fused without conflict. Physical sickness, however, manifests the existence of the other within the self and signals an uneasiness between them. A means is needed to cope with Buddhist chwasai, this other within the self. According to statements made by Leep's son at the ritual to break off a boon of ordination, "It is necessary to make a break between the two lineages, Muslim and Buddhist. If a ritual of renunciation is not carried out, undesirable effects or an illness such as stomachache or fever are likely to occur."

This is a very radical way of coping with the other within the self. The way in the Muslim's ordination is extinguish the self as a Muslim, and let the other possess their body. The outcome of negotiating with the other within them is 'death' of the self as a Muslim. This is the way of realizing 'the society' of Karatani's model, by 'fatal leap'.

In a village of Muslim-Buddhist co-residence in southern Thailand, co-existence, even through the complication of intermarriage, is supported maintaining separate religious identities by negotiating the other in the self by 'fatal leap.' In a cognatic society where principal close relations are created and maintained by sharing food and living space, religious differences may impede the maintenance of relations. Here, to enable the emergence of 'society' they make provision for 'fatal leap'.