

## TUG-OF-WAR FOR MERIT: CREMATION OF A SENIOR MONK<sup>1</sup>

by

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In February 1973 I observed the cremation of an abbot of a village temple near the town of Mae Sariang in northwestern Thailand. During the three days prior to the cremation, which took place on the 9th day of the waxing moon in the 9th lunar month (northern Thai reckoning)—that is, on Sunday the 11th of February, the temporary ‘palace’ or *prāsāda* on which the corpse of the abbot had been placed was pulled to and fro by several hundreds of people. Local people call the funeral of a monk which includes such a ceremonial tug-of-war *p̄ī l̄* (ป้อล้อ), lit. ‘ceremony of the cart or sleigh’. While the people who participated in the ceremony were predominantly northern Thai or Yuan and while the deceased was also northern Thai, the custom of the tug-of-war is said to be of Shan origin. In fact, the *p̄ī l̄* ceremony which I observed is closely related to the usual Northern Thai funeral for a monk which is known as *lak prāsāt* (ลากปราสาท) or ‘pulling of the *prāsāda*’.<sup>2</sup> Both the *p̄ī l̄* and the *lak prāsāt* ceremonies share much with the Burmese rites for a monk known as *pongyi byan pwe* which Shway Yoe glosses as ‘the return of the great glory’.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will attempt an explanation of some of the

- 1) A version of this paper was read before the Siam Society in May 1974. At that time, the author was a visiting lecturer under the Fulbright program at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.
- 2) For a discussion of the elements of the *lak prāsāt* ceremony see *Praphēnī thai phāk nua* (ประเพณีไทยภาคเหนือ) [‘Customs of the Thai of the Northern Region’] by Sanguan Chōtisukharat (Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1969), pp. 242-50.
- 3) Shway Yoe (James George Scott), *The Burman* (New York: Norton, 1963; third edition first published 1909), p. 583. Shway Yoe’s account is the most extended of the *pongyi byan pwe* that I have seen in a Western language. M.E. Spiro makes brief reference to the ceremony in his study, *Buddhism and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970: 457). I myself had the opportunity to observe a part of the *pongyi byan pwe* for the late Hentawady Sayadaw in Mandalay on the 3rd of March 1973. Phya Anuman Rajadhon has noted that the Mon of Thailand also have a tug-of-war of the corpse at a cremation, but he does not provide any detail—*Kōi-tōi* (เกิด-ตาย) [‘Birth-Death’] by Sathian Kōsēt (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press, 1962), p. 252.

symbolism evident in the *pīi lō* ceremony which I observed in Mae Sariang.

Cao Adhikāra Candradibya Indavañsō Thēra (เจ้าอธิการ จันทร์ทิพย์ อินทวงโส เถระ) or as he was known to local people, Tucao Canthip (ตุ้เจ้า จันทร์ทิพย์)<sup>4</sup>, was born in the village of Nām Dip (บ้านน้ำดิบ) near the town of Mae Sariang in 1916.<sup>5</sup> After having served as a novice in the local temple, he was ordained at the age of 21 into the monkhood. He remained in the monkhood throughout his life and continued to live in the temple in his home village. While he did not attain any significant scholastic honors awarded by the Thai Sangha, he was locally respected as a knowledgeable practioner of Yuan or northern Thai Buddhism. For many years before his death, he had been the abbot of the local wat and held the title of *cao adhikāra* (เจ้าอธิการ) which indicates that he was an abbot who was also a *thēra* (เถระ) or monk who has been in the yellow robes for more than ten years. Tucao Canthip passed away, or as it is said, “reached the cessation of his nature” (ถึงแก่กรรมภาพ) on the 23rd of November 1972 following a severe attack of dysentery.

After his death, Tucao Canthip's body was ritually bathed, dressed in yellow robes and placed in a casket which was kept in the temple in which he had lived. In northern Thailand, as in northeastern Thailand and Burma,<sup>6</sup> funerals for ordinary people are held as soon as possible—often within 24 hours—following death. In contrast, the bodies of senior monks (as well as high ranking lay people) are kept for some months before the cremation is held.<sup>7</sup> The District Abbot of Mae Sariang

4) *Tucao* is the northern Thai title for the abbot of a *wat*.

5) Biographical information concerning the late abbot of Wat Nām Dip, as well as some details regarding the cremation, were obtained from a mimeographed invitation to the ceremony which was prepared by the District Abbot of Mae Sariang and the lay committee of Wat Nām Dip. Additional information was obtained in interviews with Phra Khrū Anusōṅsatsanākīat, the District Abbot of Mae Sariang.

6) See S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 185 and Spiro, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

7) The body of the famous northern Thai monk, Khrūbā Sīwichai, was kept 8 years (from 1938 until 1946) before being cremated—*Chīwīth lae ngūn khōng khrūbā sīwīchāi* (ชีวิต และงานของครูบา ศรีวิชชัย) [‘The Life and Work of Khrūbā Sīwīchāi’] by S. Sūphāphā (Bangkok: Khlāngwitthayā, 1956), pp. 338-339.

explained that this delay permitted the organizers of the cremation to collect from among the congregation, the clergy, and "Buddhist faithful generally" the funds necessary for holding an expensive funeral. Sanguan Chōtisukkkharat, the northern Thai folklorist, has elaborated on this point in a short note on *pāi lō* :

Whenever a Bhikkhu who has been an abbot, has been an important monk of many lenten periods, or has been ordained from youth until his death and has never tasted the pleasure of the world (โดยไม่เคยลิ้มรสความสุขทางโลกย์เลย) died, it is arranged that his corpse be bathed and placed in a coffin. The corpse is kept several months. This long duration of keeping the corpse permits the faithful to find the money for holding the cremation because it is a major ceremony which requires the expenditure of much money. When enough money has been raised, invitations are sent to Buddhists everywhere and the schedule of merit-making events is made known.

In addition to the need for a period of time in which to raise the necessary funds for funeral expenses, I would add another reason, derived in part from my anthropological perspective, for such a delay between the time of death and the time of cremation. During this period between death and cremation, the deceased is in a state of limbo, having not yet totally departed this world nor fully entered the world beyond. This period is characterized by what Victor Turner has called "liminality", that is, it is a period, ritually marked and invested with complex symbolism, which follows separation from the normal structural roles played by individuals and which occur before a reintegration or aggregation back into the normal structural world.<sup>9</sup> This process of separation, liminality, and aggregation has long been recognized in studies of rites of passage. However, it has only been with the work of Turner that attention has been focussed on liminality. During the liminal period, Turner has shown, the participants are confronted ritually with ambiguity, paradox, and other challenges to the normative basis of social life.

8) Sanguan, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

9) Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93-110.

Ultimately a new resolution, communicated symbolically in the form of sacred knowledge,<sup>10</sup> is effected, the participants are thus transformed and can be aggregated back into the world.

The death of a monk ushers in a liminal period which differs from that following the death of an ordinary layman. The corpse of an ordinary person is "dangerous" in that the spirit which adheres to the body until cremation may become a malevolent ghost. The continued presence of the corpse of a highly-respected monk poses no such threat. By virtue of the merit which such a man has accumulated through rejection of the 'pleasures of the world', his spirit is immune from such a fate after death.

Far from being dangerous, the corpse of a monk is auspicious since it becomes a unique "field of merit" for the lay followers and for Sangha brethren. The coffin containing the corpse of Tucao Canthip was kept in the *vihāra* or image hall of Wat Nām Dip and was placed to the left of the main Buddha image. Not only did the corpse receive offerings of funeral wreaths and of incense, candles, and cut flowers in special rites, but similar offerings were also placed before it on the occasion of every ritual held in the *vihāra* during the period it remained there. Each offering laid before the coffin was believed to produce merit.

Serving as a channel of merit was not the only religious function served by the corpse. More importantly, the corpse served as a constant reminder of a fundamental message of Buddhism—the impermanence of self and the transitoriness of life. Meditation upon corpses is strongly enjoined in the texts of Buddhism and is ritually recongized in Mae Sariang (as elsewhere in Northern Thailand) in the ceremony of *khao kam* (เข้ากรรม or เข้ากำ)—lit., 'to enter karma'. In Mae Sariang this ceremony is held for seven days each January during which all of the monks and novices of the district go into meditation retreat in the Mae Sariang cemetery. The decaying body also finds representation in pictures which are hung in the buildings of a *wat*. The corpse of a former monk, whose cremation can be long delayed, is perhaps the best of all symbols in bringing to consciousness reflection about the decay and disintegration of man's physical form.

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10) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Following the death of a monk, a committee is formed to organize the funerary rites, schedule the events for the cremation, and collect the money to pay for the costs of the ceremony. For the funeral of Tucao Canthip, the organizing committee was cochaired by the District Abbot, representing the clergy, and the Headman of Bān Nām Dip, representing the laity. The other members of the committee consisted of other members of the Sangha in Mae Sariang and members of the lay stewardship committee of Wat Nām Dip. For ordinary lay people, such an organizing committee includes no representation as such from the Sangha.<sup>11</sup> The death of a member of the Order, however, is not the concern only of his clerical brothers as the equal division between lay and Sangha in organizing committee for the funeral of Tucao Canthip indicates. Tucao Canthip had been both a member of the Sangha community, which in the small district of Mae Sariang included the clergy of the whole district, and spiritual mentor for the congregation of Wat Nām Dip.<sup>12</sup>

There appears to be no set length of time which is deemed appropriate or auspicious for keeping the corpse before the cremation.

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- 11) The organizing committee—or sponsors—for the cremation of an ordinary layman usually consists of close relatives of the deceased. If one or more such relatives is a monk, he or they may be included on the committee, but as relatives, not as monks.
- 12) For very important monks, the role of both the local clergy and congregation in organizing the funeral may be considerably reduced. For the funeral of Khrūbā Sīwichai, the feeling that he was spiritual mentor to all of northern Thailand, monk and layman alike, and not only for the local congregation of Wat Bān Pāng in Lī District, Lamphūn province, prevailed. The cremation actually took place at Wat Cāmthewī near Lamphūn city and not at his home temple (S. Suphāphā, *op. cit.*, pp. 338 *et seq.*) The committee which organized the cremation of Phra Upāliguṇṇupamacārya (Fū Attasivō Thēra), the late abbot of Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai who died in 1973, was headed by the Regional Ecclesiastical Chief, the Provincial Abbot, the acting abbot of Wat Phra Sing, the Governor of Chiang Mai Province, and the senior lay steward of Wat Phra Sing. Moreover, as this was a cremation at which the King himself brought the fire, much of the planning was removed from the hands of the local committee and undertaken by the palace. Indeed, the date of the cremation (which took place on 15 January 1974) was changed several times to accommodate His Majesty's schedule.

However, certain considerations, which are symbolically significant, influence the choice of time for a cremation. The District Abbot of Mae Sariang said that it was preferable for cremations to be held in the dry season and that they should not be held during lent. All of the cremations of monks in northern Thailand on which I have been able to obtain information occurred between December and March. Shway Yoe also notes for Burma "that a pongyi byan never takes place during lent".<sup>13</sup> Lent is the period of rain, of planting, of fertility, of new life as well as the period for retreat for the Sangha.

The committee organizing the funeral for Tucao Canthip chose February as the time for the cremation because by that month villagers in Nām Dip would have finished harvesting rice and would not have yet begun planting dry-season crops (which in Nām Dip consists mainly of groundnuts). The fields in which the cremation was to be held was filled only with the stubble of harvested rice. A Sunday was chosen for the actual day of the burning since it was not a workday for schoolchildren, teachers, and officials. The day chosen for the burning was also purposely not a Buddhist sabbath day (วันพระ), that is, a day on which the clergy would have normal ritual duties to perform. In short, the time chosen for the cremation linked the unfertile season in which the fields had only dead rice stalks with the death of a man. The liminality of the day of burning was underscored by the scheduling of the cremation for a time when both laity and clergy would not have normal functions to carry out.

The site chosen for the cremation was not the 'cemetery' where cremations of most lay people are carried out but was a field belonging to a relative of the late monk. This field lay to the west of Wat Nām Dip and was on ground which was lower than that on which the wat is located. In the field, several temporary edifices were erected just prior to the beginning of the scheduled events. There were two pavilions. One which faced west was used by the participating monks and the second, at right angles to the first and facing south, was used by a small portion of the laity who attended. Opposite this second pavilion was a stage used for performances of *likē* or Siamese folk opera. Next to it

13) Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 585.

was a movie screen, hung on bamboo poles. In front of the first pavilion was the 'course' on which the tug-of-war would be held. Prior to the beginning of the funeral, the *prāsāda* without the coffin was placed on this course 15 or 20 meters away from the main pavilion. Later, during the three days of the ceremony, the *prāsāda* with the coffin would sit in the same place except when the tug-of-war was taking place. Some hundred or so meters away from the pavilions, etc. were four bamboo poles, rising about 20 meters into the air, to which a yellow cloth which had been part of the late monk's robes was attached. This construction, called *phā phidān* or *phā phēdān* (ผ้าพิดาน or ผ้าพีดาน), 'cloth canopy', marked the place where the burning would occur.

At this point, we should examine the *prāsāda* in some detail. The one used in Mae Sariang consisted of an outer structure erected on poles about five meters high with a 'roof' supported not only by these poles but also by other poles set at diagonals to provide strength. The roof itself consisted of a central tower with five tiers, surrounded by four smaller towers of three tiers each. Each of these towers were crowned by a pole decorated with 'flags'. Inside this outer structure was another, again elaborately decorated, which contained the casket. The bottom of the *prāsāda* was decorated on both sides with long Nāga figures. The whole edifice rested upon a sleigh to which heavy kenaf ropes had been attached.

In Mae Sariang, the *prāsāda* just described served both as the vehicle on which the body was transported to the place of cremation and as the funeral pyre itself. This was rather unusual as in most cremations of monks (and high status laymen) in both Thailand and Burma, hearse and pyre are separate structures. In northern Thailand, the cart used at a funeral of a monk was traditionally in the shape of a *hastiliṅga* (หัตถิลิงค์) bird, a mythical creature which has the head, trunk, and tusks of an elephant and the body of a bird. One still sees carts in this shape in some funerals for monks, although the custom has begun to disappear, according to a former District Abbot of Phrāo in Chiang Mai province, because the work required to make the animal is too time consuming and too costly. Few northern Thai whom I have asked know the significance of the *hastiliṅga* bird and no one had heard of the ritual

killing of the animal which used to occur in northeastern Thailand.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the animal, in its strange combination of elements, must appear to those who see it as disturbing and even dangerous since the creature is not of one class of beings or another.<sup>15</sup> Symbols which cause confusion of normal categories of classification play important roles in liminal periods of rites of passage during which paradox, ambiguity, and bafflement arising from actual experience are confronted and resolved.<sup>16</sup>

14) According to an old oral myth in northeastern Thailand, the *hastilinga* bird long ago inhabited the forests of Himaphan near the Indian kingdom of Takasila. There it destroyed both human and animal life. Phrayā In (Indra), the Lord of Heaven decided to send his wife, Nang Sutsada, to eliminate this troublesome creature. She was reincarnated as Nang Sila, the daughter of the King of Takasila. When she reached the age of 15, she combatted the *hastilinga* and succeeded in destroying it. Two years later, she herself died and returned to Indra's heaven. According to Brengues, who relates this myth, at the cremation of every high-ranking person in Ubon—at least until 1904 when he made his observations—the body is carried on a cart constructed in the shape of the *hastilinga* bird. A woman, who inherits her role from her mother, plays the part of Nang Sutsada/Sila under the name of Suthan or Sukata. She reenacts the killing of the *Hastilinga* which must be done, so it was believed, "in order that the deceased will have the power to attain Nirvana"—Dr. Brengues, "Les cérémonies funéraires à Ubon," *BEFEO*, IV (1904), pp. 730-736. Archaimbault reports that in Campasak, the same ritual is still carried out except that the *Nāga* has been substituted for the *hastilinga*—Charles Archaimbault, *Structures Religieuses Lao* (Vientiane: Vithagna, 1973), pp. 189-191. Formerly, for the cremations of the Kings of Siam, the funeral procession included "a host of more than sixty effigies of mythical animals, representing the denizens of Himaphān or Himālayan fairyland"—H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 150. Most of these, like the *hastilinga* (which as one of the sixty), combine features from more than one animal (*op. cit.*, pp. 167-8). Without pursuing the meaning of these animals very far, we can note that their ambiguous nature symbolizes the threat to normal structure posed by death. By ritually enacting the killing of the animals, a resolution is achieved since the spirit of the decease can now ascend to heaven.

15) Compare Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

16) Turner, *op. cit.* In Burma, I saw a hearse used at the funeral of the Henthawady Sayadaw in Mandalay which appeared to be in the shape of the *hanisa* bird. This animal, which is usually called, in English, a Brahminy Duck or (incorrectly) a swan, figures prominently in Burmese religious art and carries a heavy load of meaning in whatever context it appears.



In Mae Sariang, the only animal symbol present was the Nāga which was represented on the bottom part of the *prāsāda*. The Nāga has generally been interpreted as a fertility symbol, but it does not have this meaning alone. It also carries a cosmographic meaning, representing the seas which surround Mount Meru. The *prāsāda*, in turn, represents Meru, a name by which the funerary pyre is also known. The fertility meaning of the Nāga does remain, conveying in this context masculine sexuality which has been suppressed when a man enters the Sangha. The juxtaposition of monk and Nāga, here manifest in the body of the monk which lies in the coffin above the Nāga, recalls other pairings such as the use of the term Nāga as the name of the candidate for monkhood and the depictions in sculpture and painting of the Buddha's conquest of the Nāga.

The cremation pyre, whether distinct from the hearse as is normally the case,<sup>17</sup> or combined with it as was the case in the funeral of Tucao Canthip, is recognized by local people as a model of the cosmos. The tiered rooves represent the levels of existence or heavens located on Mount Meru.<sup>18</sup> Through the fire of the cremation, the deceased monk's earthly model of heaven becomes transformed into actual heaven, that is the abode for the soul of this virtuous man. That monks and high-ranking laymen are burnt in such elaborate *prāsāda* while ordinary people are not symbolizes the belief that those with great merit (evidenced in the wearing of yellow robes or in possessing power and wealth) will enjoy a heavenly reincarnation.<sup>19</sup>

17) Sanguan says that the structure used as the pyre for a monk in northern Thailand will be in the shape of a *peñcā* (ပဏ္ဍိတ) or *prāsāda caturamukha* (ပရိဘူတ) —Sanguan, *op. cit.*, p. 244. Wales has described such a shape, used for the pyre of a royal cremation in Bangkok, as follows: "On the floor of the Meru was erected the *brah peñca*, or Pyre Proper, an octagonal pyramid diminishing by right angle gradations, and terminating in a truncated top" (Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 146).

18) Compare Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

19) The pyre used for the funeral of the Henthawady Sayadaw which I saw in Mandalay had been constructed in a large area opposite the famous Mahamuni temple. From a platform, a meter or so high, an incline led up to the central part of the pyre which was perhaps 5 or 6 meters high. The corpse, in an open glass coffin, was moved up this incline in a 'sleigh' with the head of a horse

The *phā phidān* or the yellow cloth canopy mounted on bamboo poles at the site of the burning appears to be a uniquely northern Thai custom. It is found only at the cremation of monks or novices and never at the cremation of lay persons, no matter how high-ranking. Sanguan has written that:

these four poles are planted to form a square. A monk's cloth (ผ้าบังสุกุล) belonging to the deceased will be stretched as a canopy . . . [At the burning,] the *cīwōṇ* canopy will be watched to see if it catches fire or not. If the flames burn a hole [in the cloth] this shows that the soul (วิญญาณ) of the virtuous *thēra* has departed well . . .<sup>20</sup>

Puangkham Tuikhiao, a former District Abbot of Phrāo in Chiang Mai and currently a research associate in the Faculty of the Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University, says that if the cloth burns, it shows that the monk was 'pure' (บริสุทธิ์) and, thus, entitled to a high rebirth. If it does not burn, then it indicates that the monk still has 'impurities' (กิเลส) and must return in a state less than that of heaven. He will still enjoy a better rebirth than ordinary men.

The events scheduled for the cremation of Tucao Canthip began with an 'entertaining' form of sermon, a performance of *likē*, and a movie in the evening on Thursday, the 8th of February and ended with the collecting of the remains in the early morning of Monday, the 12th

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and the tail of bird. Young girls, dressed in traditional court costume, stood with monks and an orchestra on the lower platform while other maidens and men, dressed in Burmese finery, stood along the incline. The upper platform was flanked by 3-tiered rooves on either side. The topmost roof had three towers, each of five tiers and ending in a mast. In addition to the cart on which the coffin was transported and the pyre, there were a number of other structures in the grounds which were smaller, yet still elaborate, facsimiles of the pyre. A number of these had false coffins placed at a height about three meters above the grounds. According to Shway Yoe, these are also called *pyathat* (Burmese cognate with *prāsāda*) and are brought by people from different quarters and villages. He says that these are also burnt with the pyre (Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 586.).

20) Sanguan, *op. cit.*, pp. 247, 248.

of February.<sup>21</sup> The events scheduled, according both to the printed schedule and to the words of informants, provided the lay people who attended with the opportunity to make merit through presentation of food and alms to the participating Sangha, through listening to sermons and through the unique opportunity of the tug-of-war over the body of the deceased monk. In addition, those who came could observe the burning and enjoy various entertainments. The clergy, in their turn, made merit by performing their ritual roles in the events. Finally, a small group of monks and laymen gathered a few remains to be kept for later interment in a stupa.

The entertainments drew the largest crowds of all events save for the tug-of-war and the burning. In addition to the nightly performance of *likē* and showing of movies, the entertainments also included some of the sermons. On Saturday evening, a well-known monk from Māe Rim near Chiang Mai delivered a two-hour version of the Jujaka story from the Vessantara Jātaka. For the whole two hours, he had the audience in stitches as he made ribald remarks about the love of the old Brahmin, Jujaka, for a young pretty girl, as he described, with imitations of conversations, how this young girl grew into an avaricious bitch and how Jujaka, constantly plagued by flatulence (noted with appropriate sound effects), strived to do his wife's bidding. Such entertainments, which to some Westerners would seem to transgress the boundaries of respect at a funeral, are not as anomalous as they might first seem. 'Wakes', which include the playing of games, courting, gambling, and drinking, are found throughout Thailand, Laos, and Burma as part of the activities

21) The mimeographed schedule of events which was distributed to participants ended with the burning. This reflects the fact that the collection of relics is not a 'public' event, but is restricted to a few close associates of the deceased. Sanguan says that the events connected with a *pūi lū* are scheduled to take place "over a number of days, not exceeding seven. Some times the events take place during 5 days and 5 nights during which the people come each day for merit-making and feeding of the monks" (Sanguan, *op. cit.*, p. 338). The funeral for Khrübā Sīwichai lasted 15 days and 15 nights (S. Suphāphā, *op. cit.*, p. 340) and the funeral for Phra Upāliguṇūpamācārya of Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai, lasted for 4½ days, from the 12th to 16th of January, 1974.

which take place following a death.<sup>22</sup> Such activities underscore the liminality of the period because they involve watching fantasies (*likē* and movies), interacting in social relationships which do not, in the end, alter any normative structure of everyday life (games),<sup>23</sup> or entrance into states which are temporary (drunkenness, courtship).

The funeral afforded those laymen who chose to do so with several conventional ways to acquire merit. One way was to contribute to the costs of the funeral. In the announcement of the events scheduled for the cremation of Tucao Canthip, the presentation of the mid-day meal for the participating clergy on each of the three main days and the presentation of alms (เครื่องทาน) to the Sangha were specifically listed. The amount involved was not small since 56 monks (a number equal to the age of the late abbot) and four novices had been invited from various villages and towns in Mae Hong Son Province. Thus, the announcement requested that "if anyone should wish to be a donor of alms . . . please contact or make your reservations with the committee". Donors were asked to contribute 100 baht each. The greatest expense involved, that of the construction of the various edifices, was met through the merit-making donations of the villagers from Bān Nām Dip. These donations also paid for the costs of the *baṅsakula* (บังสกุล) robes which are an essential alms-offering to clergy at cremations. In addition to gaining merit through gifts to the clergy, lay people could also gain merit through listening to the sermons delivered. With the exception of the sermon concerning Jujaka, mentioned above, the sermons (which were read from Yuan texts) attracted only older people. Although these conventional ways of making merit were far from unimportant, it seems clear that the merit-making activity which attracted the greatest number of people was the tug-of-war.

After the body in its coffin had been moved from the temple to be placed in the *prāsāda* on Friday, the first tug-of-war took place. On

22) See Tambiah, *op. cit.*, p. 185; Robert Kickert, "A Funeral in Yang Terng, Changwat Ubol, Northeast Thailand, *Journal of the Siam Society*, XLVIII (1960), pp. 76-7, 78, 81-2; Archambault, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 182; Spiro, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

23) This point is developed by Clifford Geertz in "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus*, CI (1972), pp. 1-38.

each afternoon of the next two days, a similar event occurred, lasting several hours on each occasion. The *prāsāda* was oriented in an East-West direction in the middle of the field. The heavy ropes attached to each side of the sleigh were picked up by men and dragged in opposite directions. Then men, women and children—mainly northern Thai but with some Karen and Shan as well—took hold of the ropes on either side. There was no social basis for determining who chose to go on one side rather than the other and I observed many who changed sides. A number of men and even a few women had appointed themselves as coaches cum cheerleaders; several even had megaphones. These people encouraged the side they were on to begin pulling. Usually the side that began would have the advantage, but would be stopped finally as more and more people joined the other side. Sometimes the rope broke and the side having the good rope might pull the *prāsāda* several dozen meters before they were persuaded to stop. Flags marked the course on which the tug-of-war took place, but there were no 'goals', no points which if the *prāsāda* passed, one side could claim a victory.

To my question as to why the people engaged in this apparently inconclusive competition over the corpse of a monk, I received invariably the same answer: those who participate gain great merit.<sup>24</sup> The same point was emphasized in the mimeographed announcement of events which concluded: "we invite all faithful and good people to join in the merit-making at the cremation of Cao Adhikāra Canthip by contributing strength and spirit in the tug-of-war of the *prāsāda* which is the local custom. [By doing so,] we believe that we gain great merit." Shway Yoe gives a similar explanation for the same ritual action in Burma, although he said that the merit "falls to the share of those who win in the tug-of-war".<sup>25</sup> In Mae Sariang, no distinction was made between those who participated on one side as distinct from the other. Sanguan, the northern Thai folklorist, has elaborated upon the theme that participation in the tug-of-war brings great merit:

24) No one with whom I talked nor any written source which I have consulted mentions a story or sermon connected with the ceremony of *pāzī lō*. The District Abbot of Mae Sariang thought that there might be a Shan text, but he was only guessing.

25) Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

*Pōi lō* . . . is the supreme merit-making [ceremony] because it is believed that anyone who dies in the yellow robes, having dedicated his life to the religion, has much merit (มีบุญ มีอนิสงส์). The funerary merit-making for such a monk, it is believed, will yield strong merit (กุศลแรง). Thus, merit-making should be undertaken without concern for the expense (ทำบุญก้อน้อย่างไม่คำนึงถึงการสิ้นเปลือง).<sup>26</sup>

The tug-of-war, in contrast to simply pulling the *prāsāda* directly to the place of burning, serves to prolong the tapping of merit possessed by the late monk.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of the competition is not for one side or the other to obtain more merit, but to draw out as much merit through pulling the *prāsāda* to and fro. Inherent in this act is the belief, widely held in Theravada Buddhist societies, that one who possesses great merit—eg., a highly esteemed monk—can share this merit, and the benefits following from such merit, with others who act in appropriate ways.<sup>28</sup>

The transfer of merit through the pulling of the corpse is not the only meaning of the tug-of-war. As noted above, the course for the tug-of-war was oriented in an East-West direction, with the site of the cremation being located to the West. The West is recognized by Mae Sariang people, as by most Southeast Asians, as the way of the dead, while the East is associated with birth and auspiciousness. The movement, then, from East to West, back again, and so on, clearly symbolizes the cycle of birth, death, rebirth, etc.<sup>29</sup>

26) Sanguan, *op. cit.*, pp. 337-338.

27) It should be noted that in usual northern Thai funerals for monks, the *prāsāda* is pulled in procession for a considerable distance before being taken to the place of cremation. In the most important cremation of a monk in modern history, that of Khrūbā Siwichai in 1946, the body was carried in procession from the village of Bān Pāng in Li District, Lamphūn to near Lamphūn city, a distance of about 80 kilometers (S. Suphāphā, *op. cit.*, pp. 338-9).

28) See Charles F. Keyes, "The Power of Merit" in *Visakha Puja 2516* (Bangkok : Buddhist Association of Thailand, 1973), pp. 95-102.

29) Similar symbolism is associated with the collection of the ashes of a king after a royal cremation in Bangkok :

The ashes were given roughly the form of a human figure with the head turned towards the east. They were then stirred up and reformed with the head turned towards the west. Finally, the process was repeated with the head turned towards the east. This is evidently symbolic of the rising, setting, and again rising of the sun—birth, death, and rebirth (Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 154).

The resolution of the tug-of-war was in keeping with the above meaning for eventually the context ended when the *prāsāda* was pulled to the site of the cremation which laid to the West. In the late afternoon on Sunday, the District Abbot gave a signal to end the tug-of-war and to begin the burning. Everyone then shifted to the western end of the *prāsāda* and helped in pulling the edifice to the place under the *phā phidān* where the actual cremation would take place. Once there, several men began to pile dried logs around the coffin inside the outer structure of the *prāsāda*. Next, members of the lay committee placed packages containing clerical robes on the pyre. These were the *pānsakula* robes which are symbolic reminders of Buddha's enjoinder to the monks that they should use discarded shrouds for their robes. After the monks had claimed their cloths, several laymen poured gasoline on the firewood. Next, an elaborate fireworks system was set off; this involved the lighting of rockets which travelled along wires to lantern-shaped containers of gunpowder which when ignited set off yet another rocket. The final rocket plunged into the pyre itself. Yet other rockets were set off along the ground towards the pyre; it was one of these which actually started the burning.

The pyre burned rapidly and people watched the burning for only a few minutes before turning to go home. Before departing, it was apparent to all that the *phā phidān* was not going to catch fire. A few lay men from the local congregation stayed to see that the flames consumed all the *prāsāda* and the body contained therein.

On the following morning, a few men from the local congregation, the monks and novices from the local temple, and a few of the late abbot's relatives foregathered at the site of the cremation. They collected some of the remains of the abbot's burnt bones. These would later be enshrined in a small *stupa*, called a *kū* (กู่) in northern Thailand, in the grounds of the wat. While in the case of the late abbot of Wat Nām Dip one would not expect this *stupa* to have any great significance, some such *stupas* become the focus of cults. This is the case of the four *stupas* which contain the relics of the famous northern Thai monk,

Khrübā Sīwichai<sup>30</sup> and, in Mae Sariang, of the stupa containing the remains of the late abbot of Wat Phāphā. This latter monk had been reknowned for his holiness and supernatural powers during his life and his cremation was still talked about for the auspicious omen which had occurred at it. A circle had appeared in the middle of the *phā phidān* for which no natural explanation could be given. In the case of this monk, as in the case of Khrübā Sīwichai, people believe that their great merit has not been exhausted at the cremation and can still be tapped.

Death is one, perhaps the most important, of the experiences of man whereby he becomes threatened by chaos, by the collapse of meaning. Death, in other words, poses man with a problem of ultimate concern. Death rites serve to mediate or resolve this problem. It has long been accepted in Anthropology that such rites accomplish this end by alleviating stress, by promoting psychological solace. Yet, Geertz is surely right when he says that "religion has probably disturbed man as much as it has cheered them; forced them into a head on, unblinking confrontation of the fact that they are born to trouble as often as it has enabled them to avoid such a confrontation by projecting them into a sort of infantile fairy-world."<sup>31</sup> In the funeral rites with which we are concerned in this paper, the problem posed by death is not resolved by palliatives in the form of symbols.

The death of an ordinary man in Theravada Buddhist society poses a direct threat to structure for such a man has a status in family and community. This threat is symbolically expressed in the conception of the corpse as being dangerous. That is, the spirit of the deceased is feared lest it become a malevolent spirit, a danger which is greatest in the time of death and final disposition of the body. The dominant

30) These stupas are located at Wat Bān Pāng, Khrübā Sīwichai's home temple in Lī district, Lamphūn province, at Wat Cām Thēwī in Mụang District, Lamphūn, at Wat Suan Dōk in Mụang District, Chiang Mai Province, and at Wat Dōi Ngām in Sankamphāēng District, Chiang Mai (S. Suphāphā, 1956, pp. 352-3).

31) Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. by Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), p. 18.



concern in the death rituals for an ordinary man is with preventing the spirit's transmutation into a malevolent ghost and with ensuring that it is reborn into a satisfactory state.<sup>32</sup> These rituals also give expression to a fundamental concern with the meaning of death itself, but this concern is muted by the more proximate concerns with the loss of a person with strong personal and social attachments.

While the corpse of an ordinary lay person is conceived of as being dangerous, that of the monk is thought to be just the opposite. This inversion can be explained, I believe, by the fact that during life the monk has, symbolically, at least, broken the personal and social ties which he had to the world and had succeeded in rejecting the pleasures of the world, most notably the pleasures of masculine sexuality. It is relevant to note that the symbolism of non-fertility and barrenness is associated not only with death, as manifest in the choice of dry fields containing rice stubble in the dry season as the place and time for the cremation, but also with becoming a monk. This is symbolically evident in the opposition between the yellow robes, the monk, and the Buddha on one side and the Naga on the other.

Death transforms the monk not into a threat to the aspects of life most valued but into a vehicle whereby the good life can be achieved both by himself and by others. For himself, it is believed that the monk will not be reborn into a more holy state, but will be reborn in heaven where earthly pleasures can be enjoyed without the suffering which accompanies such pleasure in this world. Herein lies the meaning of the *prāsāda*, whose burning together with the body, transforms the monk into a den-

32) Both Tambiah, writing of northeastern Thailand (*op. cit.*, pp. 191 *et seq.*) and Spiro, writing of Burma (*op. cit.*, p. 253) stress that death rites for ordinary men have the primary functions of preventing the spirit of the deceased from becoming an evil spirit and of ensuring, through merit-making for the dead, that the spirit of the deceased enjoys a satisfactory rebirth. Although it is considerably less important, merit-making for the dead at the funeral of a monk is not unknown. However, it takes on a unique characteristic. Sanguan reports that a few of the disciples or relatives of the late monk may become ordained for a temporary period of time. Such ordination "is believed to be very meritorious and to help the deceased to hold on to the edge of the yellow robes in going to a blissful state" (Sanguan, *op. cit.*, p. 246).

zen of heaven. Moreover, the monk's great merit which ensures him of a good rebirth can be shared with those who assist in pulling his body to the place of burning. Such is the meaning, in part, of the tug-of-war.

Although death is conceived of as auspicious in the case of a monk, it cannot be denied, even in the funeral for a monk, as an ultimate concern. Indeed, shorn of more proximate challenges posed to structure by the death of an ordinary person, the death of a monk becomes the occasion, in the funeral rites which follow, for a clear confrontation with this ultimate concern. The dissolution of self and decay of the body is kept before the eyes of the local people during the long period that the body is kept before the cremation. Again, the choice of the time and place for the cremation reemphasizes the negative side of death. And for all the decoration and elaborate construction, there is no question in anybody's mind but that the *prāsāda* contains a corpse.

This awareness of death is met by symbolic answers to the question of what death means. These answers are supremely Buddhist. Man is born to die and dies to be reborn once again. Such is the fundamental meaning of the tug-of-war. It is also the meaning of the act of burning which effects the transformation between death and rebirth. While in the case of the monk, this rebirth will be a pleasureable one—how pleasureable being known by whether the *phā phidān* burns or not, it will not be the final one. With the exceptions of arahans, the likes of whom have not been seen in the world for a long time, monks, like ordinary laymen, have not exhausted their karma at death. Thus, they too will be reborn. And here we return again to the symbolism of the tug-of-war which can be seen as competition between death and life in which there is no ultimate champion. That champion is neither death nor life; but, for an understanding of this Buddhist conception it is necessary to go beyond the symbols found in death rites.

Those who attended the cremation of Tucao Canthip came away with a sense of well being, albeit a few had this sense diluted by hangovers. The sense of well being was in part a consequence of having gained merit, through participation in the tug-of-war. It was also, in part, a

consequence of an experience of "communitas" during the tug-of-war and in the entertainments during which social differences were irrelevant. In addition, the power of the symbols of the ritual etched on most minds some idea of the meaning of death. If this meaning were to be reflected upon—and admittedly it is only by a very few—it would be found to be not wholly satisfactory. It is for this reason that Buddhist theology is not confined to ritual symbols alone, deeper understandings come through study and meditation.

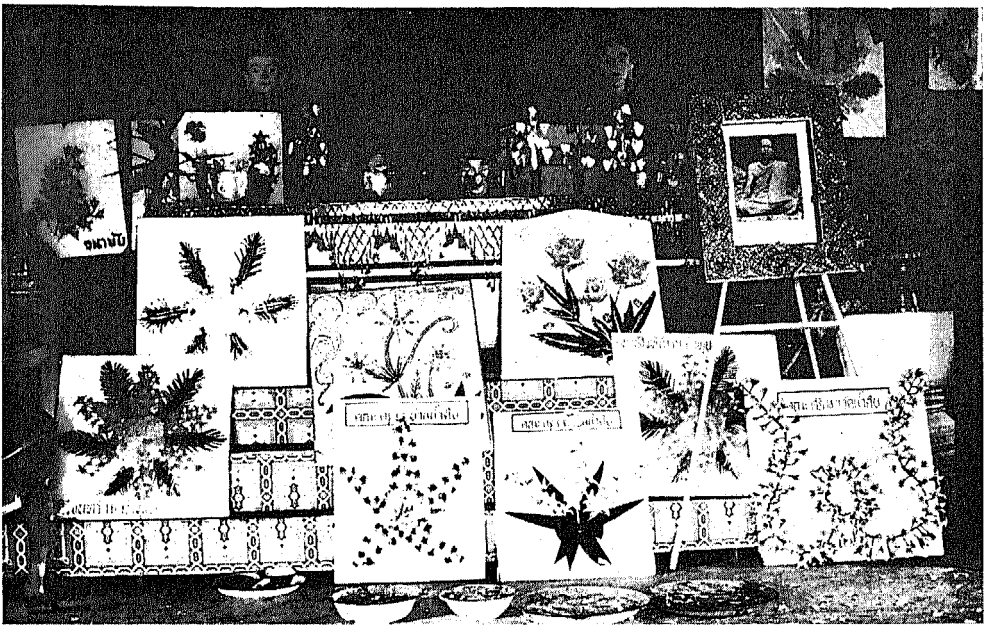


Fig. 1. Coffin containing body of Tucao Canthip lying in state in Wat Nām Dip, December 1972.

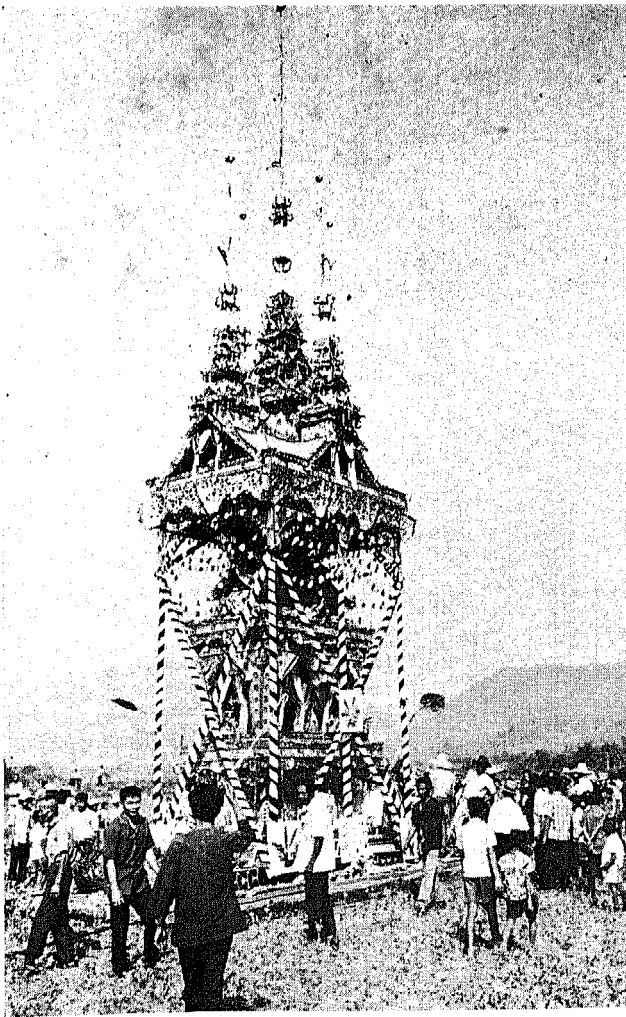


Fig. 2. *Prāsāda* used in the cremation of Tucao Canthip, Mae Sariang, February, 1973.



Figs. 3 and 4. Tug-of-War at the Cremation of Tucao Canthip, Mae Sariang, February, 1973.

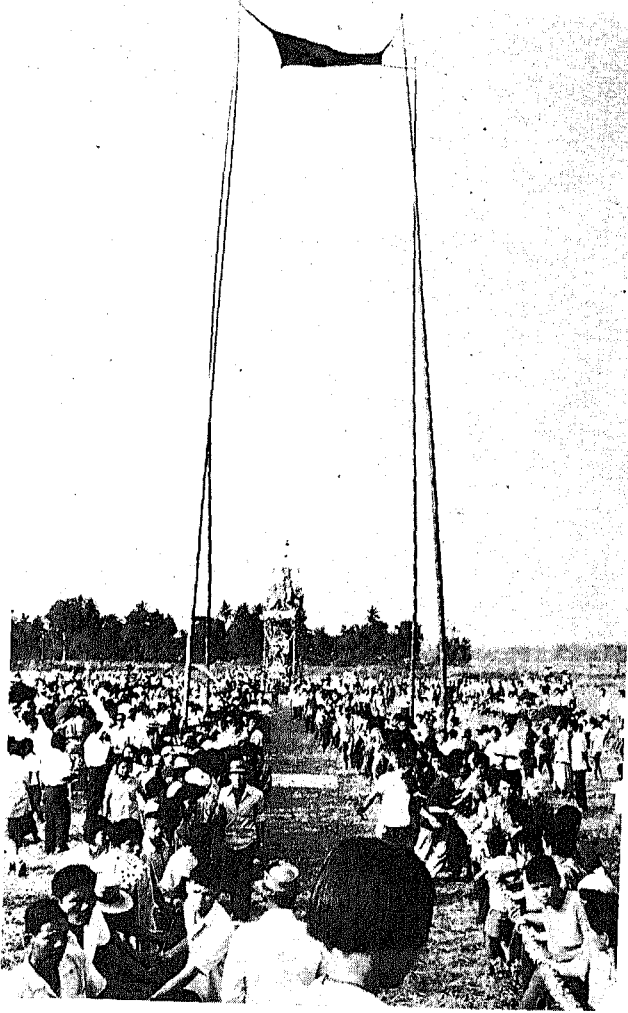
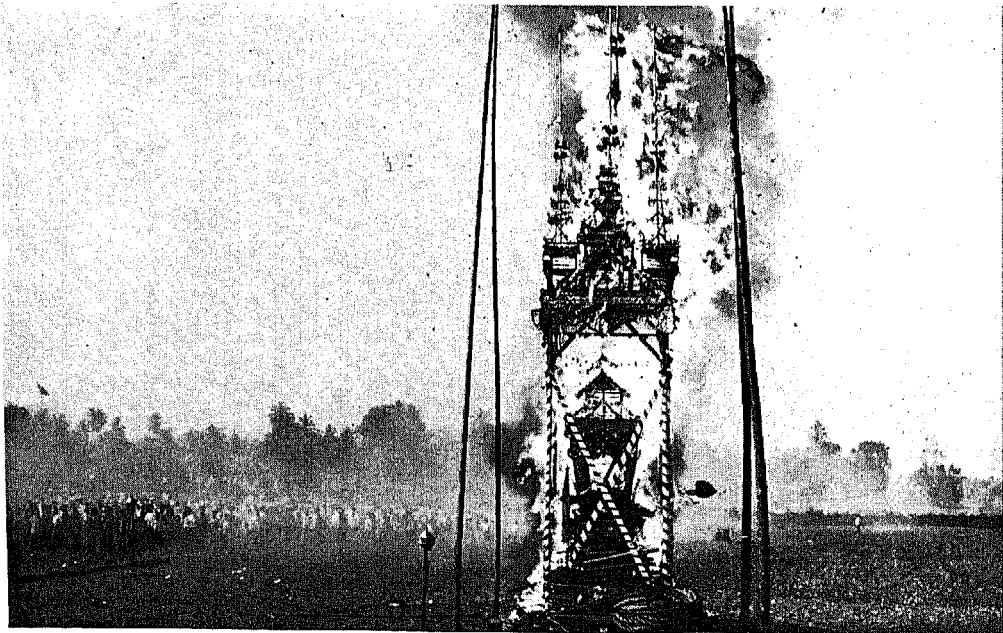
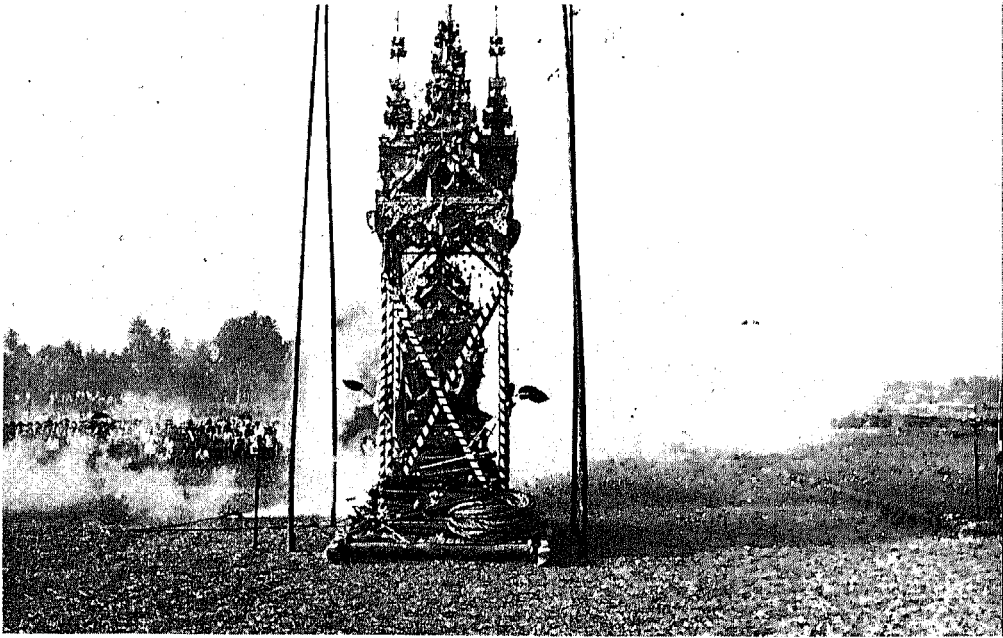


Fig. 5. Prāsāda being pulled in place under the *phū phiaūn* where the actual cremation will take place.



Figs. 6 and 7. Rockets being sent at the pyre and the pyre in flames.