

A NOTE ON RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN THAILAND*

by

Jack Bilmes

Invitations

Much has been written about Thai Buddhist beliefs and practices. This is one of the most intensively studied areas of Thai life. The organization of the *Sangha* (the Buddhist Order), the role of the monk, the place of the *wat* (the temple complex) in village life, the ceremonial cycle, and the understandings and objectives of the Thai Buddhist layman have all been well described. But there is an important aspect of religious life which has received scant attention—between-wat relationships. This omission is surprising, since these relations are of considerable importance in the religious life of the village and may be of some significance in the study of Thai political and social integration.

I will base my discussion on data collected in the Northern Thai village of Sang Ton. I have reason to believe that these data are fairly typical for rural Northern Thailand and perhaps, with some modifications, for the rest of Buddhist Thailand as well. Between-wat relationships are manifested in joint participation in certain ceremonies which take place at the wat. When the village of Sang Ton (whose inhabitants are all members, and the only members, of the Sang Ton Wat congregation) has one of these ceremonies, it invites, in the name of the Sang Ton Wat, certain other wats to participate. The invitation may be to one monk or to some or all the monks and novices of the wat, or to the monks, novices, and congregation, depending on the occasion and the closeness of the relationship between the two wats. The relationship is reciprocal, so when the other wat has that ceremony, it will invite participation from the Sang Ton Wat. (Each year an assessment is made against every household in Sang Ton to finance village participation in the

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ceremonies to which it is invited by other wats. The headman and the abbot set the amount of each assessment, according to the economic status of each household.) Moreover, the form of the participation will be the same on both sides. If, when Sang Ton performs ceremony A, it invites one monk from Wat X, then, when Wat X performs the same ceremony, it will invite one monk from Sang Ton.

The Sang Ton Wat has such reciprocal relationships with 51 other wats. Moreover, the total field of relationships is internally ordered along a dimension which may be labelled "closeness." This order is manifested in the type of invitation (in terms of occasion and persons invited) which is issued to a particular wat. There are eleven named occasions in which outside wats may participate: (1) *ta:n sala:k*, (2) *ta:n ton ngeun*, (3) *tang tham*, (4) *ta:n do:j kha:w*, (5) *the:t tham*, (6) *ta:n tho*, (7) *po:j luang*, (8) *nga:n ban phacha:*, (9) *nga:n upasombot*, (10) *tho:t pha:pa:*, (11) *kathin*. These are all merit-making occasions, involving presents to monks and the host wat. Not one of these occasions is regularly scheduled, although it may be predicted that each rainy season, if a *ta:n sala:k* is not performed, then a *ta:n ton ngeun*, *ta:n do:j kha:w*, or *tang tham* will be held in its place, and conversely, if none of the latter three are held as an intervillage occasion, then a *ta:n sala:k* will occur. In Sang Ton, however, a *ta:n sala:k* occurs most years.

It seems reasonable to believe that those wats with the closest relations to the Sang Ton Wat will be invited to the most occasions. Before looking more closely at this hypothesis we may note that any wat invited to *ta:n sala:k* will not be invited to *the:t tham*. The fact of this non-overlap may lead us to suspect that both these occasions are coordinated as part of some single larger occasion, and our suspicion will be correct. The villagers assert that it is neither necessary nor appropriate to invite a wat for *the:t tham* if it has already been invited for *ta:n sala:k*. Insofar as wat relations are concerned, invitation to one is a substitute for (although not, as shall be later explained, precisely equivalent to) invitation to the other. For the moment, *ta:n sala:k* and *the:t tham* shall be considered together as one occasion, and coded "C." Occasions 2, 3, and 4 (*ta:n ton ngeun*, *tang tham*, and *ta:n do:j kha:w*)

are, for our purposes, structurally equivalent, since they all call for invitations to the same set of wats. These three occasions are coded "A." *ta:n tho* is coded "B" and *po:j luang* is "D." My data on *nga:n banphacha*: and *nga:n upasombot*, both ordination ceremonies, are not complete enough to warrant great confidence, but they seem to fit in category "A." I will leave the ordination ceremonies out of the analysis, together with *tho:t pha:pa* and *kathin*. As an intervillage event, *tho:t pha:pa* involves one congregation deciding to hold a merit-making ceremony at the wat of another congregation, so as to help out the second wat in a period of financial stress. It is a fairly unusual occurrence and does not proceed according to the ordinary rules of invitation. *Kathin* is also an exceptional occasion with special rules of its own. (My informants could not recall ever having had *kathin* in Sang Ton.)

Figure 1

| | | Occasions | | | |
|------|-------|-----------|---|---|---|
| | | A | B | C | D |
| Wats | 1-6 | X | X | X | X |
| | 7-9 | | X | X | X |
| | 10-20 | | | X | X |
| | 21-51 | | | | X |

The figure shows that if a wat is invited to A, it will also be invited to B, C, and D, if it is invited to B, it will also be invited to C and D, etc. This suggests that we can conceive the wats as being located on a single dimension which will account for the patterning of invitations. I have already named this dimension "closeness." (This refers to closeness of relationship, not necessarily physical distance.) We have so far distinguished four degrees of closeness.

The analysis can be further elaborated by taking account of the fact that there can be different degrees of participation in occasion C. For certain wats, all the monks and novices, together with the entire congregation, are invited. This form of invitation will be coded "C₁." For certain other wats, only one monk and one novice are invited. This will be coded "C₂." The remaining wats which participate in occasion

C are not invited to *ta:n sala:k*, at all, but, in the weeks immediately following *ta:n sala:k*, one monk from each wat is invited to come and preach (*the:t tham*) at the Sang Ton Wat. This is coded "C₃." (That the invitations to *the:t tham* are properly conceived as part of the *ta:n sala:k* occasion is shown not only by the complementarity of invitations referred to earlier, but also by the fact that in years when *ta:n sala:k* is not held, the usual invitations to *the:t tham* are not issued.)

In figure 2, these new distinctions are taken into account.

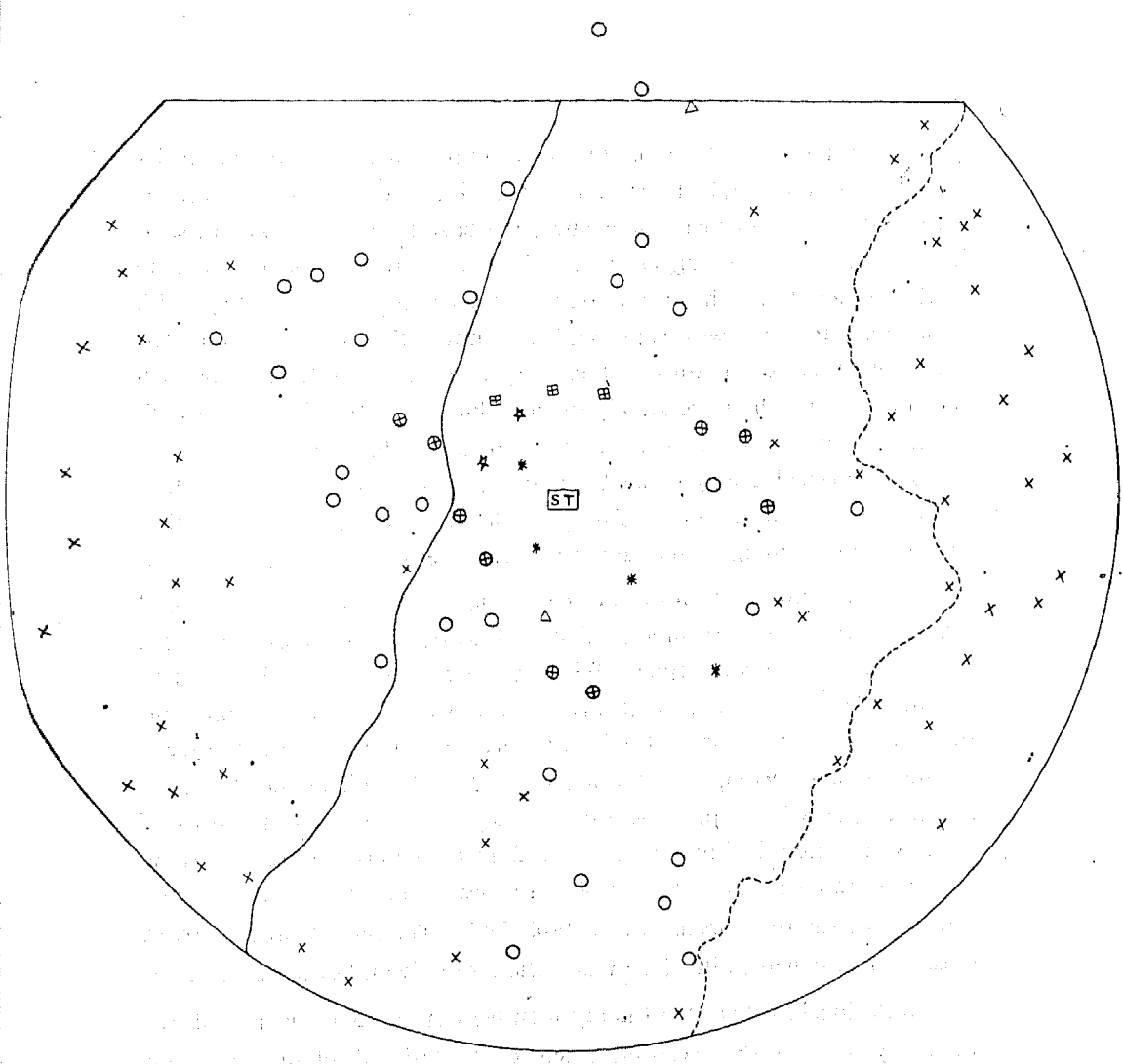
Figure 2

| | | Occasions | | | | | |
|------|-------|----------------|---|---|----------------|----------------|---|
| | | C ₁ | A | B | C ₂ | C ₃ | D |
| Wats | 1-4 | X | X | X | | | X |
| | 5-6 | | X | X | X | | X |
| | 7-9 | | | X | X | | X |
| | 10-11 | | | | X | | X |
| | 12-20 | | | | | X | X |
| | 21-51 | | | | | | X |

This figure does not look as neat as Figure 1 because of the complementarity of C₁, C₂, and C₃. A slight change in conceptualization will rectify this. Let us think of C₃ as representing a minimal amount of participation in *ta:n sala:k*. C₂ then implies this minimal amount of participation *plus* something more. When appropriate, we put an "X" under C₃ to show minimal participation, and under C₂ to show "something more." C₁ represents an additional "something more." This conception allows us to X in C₂ and C₃ wherever C₁ applies, and to X in C₃ wherever C₂ applies, thus eliminating those unsightly blanks from figure 2 and forming a perfect Guttman scale.

Factors Influencing Invitations

One might guess that "invitational closeness" would be strongly correlated with physical closeness, and figure 3 confirms this guess. At the most trivial level, we may note that none of the 51 wats with which the Sang Ton Wat has relationships are extremely distant from Sang Ton—they are all within a radius of several miles. Moreover, there is a



Legend

- ST = Sang Ton Wat
- * = wat invited to C₁, A, B, D
- ☆ = wat invited to A, B, C₂, D
- ⊗ = wat invited to B, C₂, D
- ⊕ = wat invited to C₂, D
- ⊙ = wat invited to C₃, D
- = wat invited to D
- × = other wats in area
- = paved road
- - - = Ping River

16.25 Miles

Figure 3.

tendency for wats that are invited on several occasions to be physically closer than those which are only invited on one or two occasions. Apparently, it is not distance as such, but ease of communication that is important. This is suggested by the fact that relationships extend further along the north-south axis, which is serviced by a hardtop road, than along the east-west axis, which is not. The map, however, still leaves much to be explained. The Sang Ton Wat has relationships with certain wats which are relatively distant, but not with other wats which are nearer and easier to get to. Certain wats which are quite close in terms of physical distance may be invited to fewer occasions than certain other wats which are more distant. Clearly, there are factors other than ease of communication which influence between-wat relationships.

A between-wat relationship may be initiated as a result of a special relationship between the monks of the two wats. For example, the abbot of one wat may be a relative or friend or former student of the abbot of another. The Sang Ton Wat invited the wat of Village X only on occasion D, until the present abbot, a native of Village X and a student of the abbot of Village X Wat, arrived. Now Sang Ton and Village X are in a C_1 relationship. There is a village rather far to the north of Sang Ton which is invited to C_2 and D occasions. A former (now deceased) abbot of the Sang Ton Wat moved to the wat in this village. This is how the relationship was established. The relationship between these two wats was quite close while the monk lived, but is now less so.

Relationships between the lay members of the congregations of two wats may also lead to the establishment of invitational relations between the wats. Usually, this results in invitations to D occasions only. For example, if a member of one congregation moves to another village, he may, after living in his adopted village for several years, suggest such a liaison. Or if members of congregation X have relatives in congregation Y, an invitational relationship may occur. It will be noticed on the map that there are two wats far to the south of Sang Ton (outside the circle) which are invited to occasion D. Formerly, many Sang Ton villagers went to live there, and the intervillage relationship has never lapsed.

Causes and Effects of Invitations

We must begin by making a distinction between occasions C_1 , B, and D, on the one hand, and A, C_2 , and C_3 , on the other. For the former set of occasions, invitations are issued to the congregations as well as the monks and novices of each wat. For the latter, only one or more monks, and sometimes novices, are invited from other wats (although the entire congregation of the host wat participates). When I asked villagers why wat relationships were maintained, they mentioned one or both of two reasons: (1) It is more fun to have many people (and, presumably, to meet people whom one does not see every day). We might add that this gives the village bachelors a chance to meet and court girls from other villages. (2) It is a way of getting a lot of money for the wat all at once, since the outsiders make cash contributions. This money is generally used for construction or repair of wat buildings. (Of course, it all evens out in the end.) The first reason applies best to C_1 , B, and D. The second reason given by the villagers applies equally to all six occasions. The villagers also mentioned "not allowing relations between wats to break down" and "unity."

We are led at this point to ask: "Why should relations between wats not be allowed to break down? What kind of unity is promoted by such relations and what are its consequences? In trying to answer these questions, I will have to go beyond what the villagers told me. The between-wat relationships have certain functions relating to the Buddhist Order and religion. The presence at village ceremonies of outside monks is a sign of the unity of the Buddhist faith, and at the same time the contact among the monks helps to preserve unity and orthodoxy. Since the monks are invariably feasted and given presents on these occasions, the invitational relationships may increase the incentives for entering the Order. So these relationships serve to stabilize religious practices and the religious Order.

As I have already pointed out, the relationships between wats arise from personal relationships between laymen or monks. We might hypothesize that, when the institutional means are available, and particularly if normal everyday contact is reduced to the point where the

relationship is threatened, there is a tendency to institutionalize the personal relationship. In this way, the personal relationship is expressed and maintained, and a new system of relationships emerges at an institutional level. The relationship between wats is, from one point of view, a formalization and a celebration of individual relationships. Anthropologists have shown that people often express idealizations of everyday social interaction in formal, ritualized occasions. Wat relations are formal, ritualized reaffirmations of certain social relationships which might otherwise lapse. As such, these reciprocal invitations help to maintain and widen the network of social relationships.

Wat relations are organized into what I will call a kindred-type network. The essence of a kindred-type structure is :

1) There is a (limited) field of potential relationships. Relations between temples exist only if the travelling time between them is within "reasonable" limits. However, boundaries may be extended through the setting of new limits or the introduction of new means of transportation.

2) The field of potential relations is both bounded in terms of and internally structured (at least in a statistical sense) by a dimension (e.g., genealogical distance or travelling time). The probability of an active relationship decreases with distance, as does the probability of a relatively close relationship. Some of the potential relationships are active, others not.

3) An active relationship between two individuals, groups, or institutions in the field results from a special agreement between those two individuals, groups or institutions. The set of active relationships is always open to modification through the establishment of new agreements or the termination of already existing ones.

4) Each individual, etc. is the center of his own unique (except in the case of siblings) field of potential and active relationships, and each such field overlaps with many others, thus constituting a complex, ramifying network.

This type of network with its differing potentialities for each individual, its fuzzy boundaries, and its openness to change (since individual changes will barely affect the properties of the network as a whole) may be an important element in what has come to be known as Thai "loose structure" (Embree 1950 originated the term). Certainly it is typical of Thai friendship relations, kin relations, and temple relations. The structure is there, and, from a proper perspective, maintains its essential identity, even while the individuals in it constantly exercise a great degree of personal discretion in organizing their particular sector of the network.

The network of temple relationships extends outward, until it reaches the limits imposed by geographical barriers or ethnic or political boundaries. The network is a possible mechanism for regional integration, and in this fact lies at least part of its adaptive significance. In earlier times, this network may have played a major role in maintaining the political and religious unity of the Thai, and in enabling the Thai, by virtue of their wide-scale organization, to gain political ascendancy over the other groups in the area. With the establishment of a modern, centralized government administration and the improvement in transportation and communication facilities, the network of wat relationships has perhaps lost much of its integrating function. But the network is still in operation—the villagers have their own reasons for keeping it alive. Aside from those reasons, which have already been mentioned, we may think of the network as *potentially* adaptive. In an unpredictable world, the network of wat relationships (like networks of personal relationships) provides some insurance against possible future inadequacies in the integrative capabilities of the government administration.

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