

## Recital of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka* : a social-cultural phenomenon in Kengtung, Eastern Shan State, Myanmar

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Figure 1  
A monk reciting  
the *VJ*.  
Wat Buddhapadipa,  
London. 2006  
Photo by  
Pannyawamsa

### Introduction

As in the various parts of Thailand, the recitation of the *Tham Vessantara Jātaka*, *Th. VJ* (*Jātaka* No. 547) is very highly honoured and valued by Buddhist people of all walks of life in Kengtung. It is also the most expensive form<sup>1</sup> of *Dana*<sup>2</sup>, offering.<sup>3</sup> People work hard to save enough to sponsor a recitation. It takes years for some families to make their dream come true. Some of them are even in debt after sponsoring it due to excessive spending on offerings.<sup>4</sup> Yet, people do not feel fulfilled if they have not sponsored such recitation once in their life-time. Any family who is able to sponsor this kind of performance is highly regarded in the society for their generosity.<sup>5</sup> The donors believe that this kind of merit-making bring good luck to oneself and family and relatives here and hereafter.

<sup>1</sup> It was earlier known to Kengtung people as *Mahāpāṅg Tham* or *Dhamma* of the great epoch or *Tang-Tham-long* is known in Chiangmai and Bangkok as *Mahājāt* or *Mahāchāt*. In Isarn district, in North-east Thailand, it is called *Bun Phrawes*. *Bun Phrawes* is not only the grandest merit-making ceremony in the village but also a major merit-making religious ritual which occurs after the harvest and combines merit-making with secular interests. Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>2</sup> *Dāna* is meritorious offerings to the Triple Gems or others with the object of obtaining meritorious *kamma* in the coming rebirths.

<sup>3</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews from Nan Then Haung, Warn Waw Kut, Kengtung, March 11, 2006; Nan Hla Long, Warn Com Kham, Kengtung, April 14, 2006; Nan Sarm Taan, Warn Kung Kyaung, Kengtung April 13 2006. They are the mediators who lead people to perform every kind of meritorious deeds. They play an important role between the monks and the laity in each of their monasteries. They are the people who invite monks to give sermons and lead devotees to share merit to mark the completion of their offering. Since they perform as mediators, and play an important role leading people to do merit-making, they are equally worthy of the amount offered to the monks.

<sup>5</sup> *Khemarāt Nagaung ChiangTung* (Chiang Tung: Its way of life), pp. 238-240.

The recitation of the *Th. VJ* usually takes three days or more depending on the economic status of the sponsor. The day before and a day after, other *Jātakas* or *suttas* are recited. The *VJ* recitation occupies recited an entire day, from predawn to about seven or eight in the evening. Sermons are also preached before water is poured to share the merit by the chief devotee to commemorate the donation and mark the completion of the *Th. VJ* recitation. This three-day ceremony is still very much active in Kengtung and is performed in the monasteries. The main sponsor, relatives, friends, elders and monk reciters, eat and sleep within the boundaries of the monastery for the duration.

Although the recital of the *VJ* in Thailand has been studied in details by scholars, the recital of the *Th. VJ* in Kengtung has not been described and explained to the general public. In this presentation I hope to give an account of the procedures involved in the performance of the *Th. VJ*. As this material has not been made available before, I intend to describe in some detail the social context, the preliminary negotiations and the setting in motion of the performance as a whole. I will also give some account of preparatory chanting work undertaken by the monks before the performance, as well as of the particular customs associated with the chanting of each section. In recent years there has, apparently, been some decline in certain customs associated with the performance. Although evidence is primarily anecdotal rather than textual, it appears, for instance, that sometimes the traditional consultative process with village elders has been neglected, resulting in some inappropriately high expenses on the part of some sponsors and a failure to observe the traditional 'step-by-step' approach to the practice of generosity, which avoids making inordinate financial demands on sponsoring families.

In this paper my intention is to indicate that despite these problems, symptomatic of a more widespread decline in traditional practices in rural and urban communities, the performance of the *Vessanantara-jātaka*, with all its attendant status and ceremony, still plays a vital part in Kengtung communal life in Eastern Shan State, Burma.

### 1.1 A brief history of the *Tham Vessantara-jataka* recital

The local Pādaeng Chronicle<sup>6</sup> records that this kind of recital was first performed in the Kengtung city in the homage hall of Wat Pādaeng or Pādaeng monastery by Brayā Srisudhamma Cuḷāmaṇi Mahārāja (1445AD). It was called *Mahāpāng Dhamma*.<sup>7</sup> The second performance took place on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1739 during the reign of Prince Konkaeu Indraeng. He offered a Dāna of one hundred and thirty sets of palm leaf books of *Mahā VJ* and other *Dhamma* stories and consecrated images of the Lord at Wat Jengkhum.<sup>8</sup> In June 14<sup>th</sup> 1747, the Prince also offered a Dāna of the *VJ* and other *Dhamma* stories, including five sets of *aṭṭhaparikkhāra*<sup>9</sup> and consecrated the great Arakan image of the Lord, Buddha (a replica of the Arakan Mahāmuni image of Mandalay) at the great Wat Brasing of Hokhon.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the absence of a written record, it is uncertain whether this kind of performance had ever been performed before the time of Brayā Sridhamma Cuḷāmaṇi Mahārāja in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. What is certain is that the performance of the recital of the *Th. VJ* still in existence in Kengtung today was started in the reign of Brayā Srisudhamma Cuḷāmaṇi Mahārāja. The recital of the *Th. VJ* is divided into two types.

### 1.2 Two kinds of the recitation of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka*

- i. *Tang-tham-pa-phe-nee*, the annual recitation of the *Th. VJ*
  - ii. *Tang-tham-vesan long*, the recitation of the great *Th. VJ*
- i.i. *Tang-tham-pa-phe-nee* is the annual recitation of the *Th. VJ*. It is the occasion where a group of people from a village or a town get together and sponsor monks to recite the *Th. VJ* to accumulate merit. It is also performed as *Tang-tham-pam loong wat*, the recitation of *Tham* to raise funds for monasteries, especially when a new construction work in a monastery is planned. It is like phapa in Thailand. The recitation may be repeated to mark the completion and success of any new building. This indicates that

<sup>6</sup> Saimong, *The Padaeng Chronicle and The Jengtung State Chronicle Translated*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>7</sup> *Mahāpāng Tham* or *Dhamma* of the great epoch is known in Chiengmai and Bangkok as *Mahājāt* or *Mahāchāt*.

<sup>8</sup> Saimong, *The Padaeng Chronicle and The Jengtung State Chronicle Translated*, p. 277.

<sup>9</sup> *aṭṭhaparikkhāra* means the eight necessities for a Bhikkhu or a monk. They are the three robes, the alms bowl, a razor, a needle, the girdle, and a water strainer.

<sup>10</sup> Saimong, *The Padaeng Chronicle and The Jengtung State Chronicle Translated*, p. 277.

even though they may have constructed many buildings and donated to the Buddha *Sāsanā*,<sup>11</sup> people in Kengtung do not feel satisfied unless they have included as a part of their whole donation, the sponsorship of the recitation of the *Th. VJ* and listened to it in a single day. They believe the recitation increases their merit.

ii.i *Tang-tham-vesan long*, the recitation of the great *Th. VJ*, requires a single wealthy family sponsoring the whole recital of the *Th. VJ*. It takes three days and three nights. It costs a lot. The cost includes food for all who come to listen to the recitation for the entire period, sometime also the preparation period for the ceremony; a construction of a new preaching hall; and some offerings to the monasteries.

The offering includes money to the monks and their monasteries; payment for negotiators; and the bills for artworks depicting important events in the story and for a new palm-leaf copy of the vernacular version of the *VJ*. The negotiators, who are lay, all specialists and who almost in all cases have previously received training while in the monastic order, lead people to perform rituals in every kind of meritorious deeds. They play an important role facilitating between monks and devotees. They are responsible for inviting monks to recite, give sermons and lead devotees to share merit to mark the completion of their offering. Because of their crucial role, they also receive the same amount of offering as the monks, which indeed add extra cost to the sponsors.

The artwork representing the 13 chapters can be costly, depending on the quality and the number. 13 paintings of the *Th. VJ* either hang on the wall or the artists do the paintings directly on the wall of the monastery or ordination hall itself. The purpose of the paintings is to teach people the story of the *VJ*. There are also other paintings such as scenes from the life of the Buddha, scenes of the other *Jātaka* stories, paintings of hells and heavens and so on.

As to the copy book or a set of palm-leaves, once it is donated to a monastery; it is not used again for similar functions. It is kept in the monastery for young monks to use for

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<sup>11</sup> The Buddha *Sāsanā* means the dispensation of the Buddha.

their rehearsals. This means a new copy of the *Th. VJ* has to be produced each time there is a new recitation. So, copies of the *Th. VJ* either on palm leaves or on local hand-made papers in the form of folding books become numerous.

The most suitable time for this kind of ceremony is between March to May when people are free from their seasonal cultivations. This kind of performance is only confined to one well-to-do family. If a family is able to sponsor this kind of ceremony, it is much admired for its generosity. The admiration received here may inspire people in Kengtung to follow their ancestors in sponsoring this private recitation. The difference between *Tang-tham-pa-phe-nee* and *Tang-tham-vesan long* is that there are a group sponsors for *Tang-tham-pa-phe-nee* and it is the annual recitation of each monastery. In this case, a monk from a monastery near-by must be invited to come for the recitation. However, in the case of *Tang-tham-vesan long*, it depends on the sponsors which monks and from which monastery they wish to invite for the recitation. As it is not an annual event, a monastery may hold this kind of recitation two or three times a year or even more, if initiated by different sponsors at different times. Both kinds of recitation use a common recital text; and similar donations and preparations are made.

Since early times to avoid chaos and hardship to the sponsoring family that could result from excessive expenses in merit-making, some conditions have been laid down by experienced people in Kengtung, as follows:

### **1.3 Conditions before sponsoring *Tang-Tham-vesa-long***

- i. *Dan song sa lark*, offering food and other requisites to monks by drawing a lottery system. This is a kind of offering of food and other requisites to monks, without specifying to which monk the offering is to be given.
- ii. Donating sets of robes either to the Buddha or monks before one undertakes the sponsorship of the great recitation of the *Th. VJ*. Once a year, there is an annual robes offering to monks after the rains-retreat.

iii. *Dan tham nam aio*, offering *Tham* sugar cane juice is popular and practiced by young people, especially a newly wed couple. By offering sugar cane juice, young people or a young couple wish their life to be happy and sweet like sugar cane juice.

iv. *Tang-tham kam nam*, donating a chosen *Tham* to enhance one's fortune in life. It means sponsoring a part of the *Dhammas* according to one's birthday and make an offering to the monk who recites it. For instance, if a person is born on Sunday, the *Abhidhamma-sanginī* is chosen to be recited by the monks and he has to bear the cost of offering for his service.

v. Raising one's son to become a novice or a monk is another step. There is a local belief that when a son becomes a novice, the gates of hell are closed for his mother. The same gates are closed for the father when his son receives higher ordination at the age of twenty. In fact, this kind of belief is held not only by the Shan and Burmese but also Thai Buddhists.<sup>12</sup> If there is no son in the family, then one has to look for boys from other families and undertake the sponsorship to ordain them either as a novice or a monk.

These conditions are followed firmly by people before sponsoring the great merit-making like *Tang-tham-vesan long*. In the past when a person wished to do merit-making, he used to consult with village elders who would ask him whether he had participated in each stage of the ceremony before. With the negative answer, he would have no chance to proceed but would instead start offering like the conditions mentioned above until he could be a sponsor of the *Th. VJ* recital. Sometimes the elders would advise against sponsorship on the grounds of excessive expenditure. This consultative process, which prevented excessive expenses and strain on individual families, seems to have broken down. Regarding these conditions, there were some reports that earlier there were some families who had performed this great merit-making due to their devotion and consequently suffered from poverty. Seeing those families suffering from poverty after sponsoring *Tang-tham-vesan long*, people tended to believe that because of their excessive spending on offering, they suffered a miserable life. Putting all these conditions

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<sup>12</sup> See Anuman Rajadhon, *Thet Mahā Chāḥ*, p. 11.

into consideration, we may come to the conclusion that one has to perform merit-makings step-by-step to prevent extravagant expenses in merit-making. Conditions of merit-making step-by-step are still followed by average families who cannot afford all at once. Affluent families, however, may perform everything at once and are happy doing it.

However, average families who try to follow affluent families can suffer from poverty and debt. Even nowadays, it is often reported that some are in debt because of their excessive spending on merit-making. They have to start earning from zero again to settle down their debts to lift up their life.

Every year during the rains-retreat which starts from the middle month of July to October, in the city of Kengtung, many monasteries arrange their own *Th. VJ* recitation festival. The recitation may be performed in the early part of October or on other special occasions such as funds-raising events for the monastery. However in the countryside, people prefer to hold this recitation after their harvest cultivations. They would choose three months, March, April and May, as they have to resume their seasonal cultivation in July. This kind of practice is followed in parts of Thailand though each district has its own customs regarding time and location for the ceremonies.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1.4 How monks are trained for the ceremony**

Novices and young monks are trained to recite all kinds of recitation in the monasteries. It is one of their daily duties to recite one of the *Jātaka* stories or one of the *suttas* repeatedly until they are able to recite it without any mistake. They have to be ready whether there is a ceremonial recitation or not. It takes a few years for a novice to master all kinds of recitation. For a ceremonial recitation, the invited monks are sent out in advance the sections which they are going to recite for the ceremony. Upon receiving the invitation, monks have to devote their time doing rehearsals reciting them daily until they master them. In Thailand, there are monks who specialize in reciting the *VJ*. They are

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<sup>13</sup> Anuman Rajadhon, *Thet Mahā Chāt*, pp. 8-9.

well expert in reciting particular sections.<sup>14</sup> However in the case of reciting the *Th. VJ* in Kengtung, there do not seem to be specialized monks for particular sections. They have to recite whatever sections they are assigned to, according to a lottery system.

### 1.5 Preparations for the ceremony

Before the recitation of the *Th. VJ*, the monks of the monastery where the function is taking place, with certain leading members of the village, or the town fix a suitable date for the performance. When everything is well planned out, invitations are made in advance.



Figure 2  
People carrying offerings from home to the monastery. Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa

On the actual day, people will give a hand carrying the offerings from the village to the monastery in the procession with pomp and music. The processions go round the monastery compound three times before entering the preaching hall, where all the offerings are placed in their proper places.



Figure 3  
The preaching hall is decorated with holy thread, line of flags, banana, sugar cane trees & many others. Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa.

As a preparation for the ceremony, the entrance of the monastery on the day of the *Th. VJ* recital is specially decorated with bananas trees, ripe fruits and sugar cane trees and young coconut leaves. Passing the forest gate, one will find a ceremonial fence called

<sup>14</sup> Pha Yaumg Yong, “Pra Phe Nee Tang Tham Long”, *Phang Thet Mahā Chāt Lanna*, pp.72-76; see also *Thet Mahā Chāt*, pre, pp-7-8 and details of it can also be studied “Pra Phe Nee Tang Tham Long”, *Pa Phe Nee Sip Saung Deun, Lanna Thai* by Mani Pha Yaum Yong, pp. 26-56.



‘*Rachamat*’ or king’s fence, erected at intervals and decorated with flags, banana trees and sugar cane trees. Every post in the preaching hall is also decorated with a banana with ripe fruits and sugar cane trees. In the preaching hall, small coloured flags equal to the number of a thousand of the *gāthā Phan* or a thousand stanzas are prepared. These thousand flags are distributed to the thirteen sections of the *Th. VJ* according to the number of *gāthā* in each section. There are also small beeswax candles equal in number to that of the small flags. According the traditional preparation, a thousand lotus flowers, 1,000 Kasalawng flowers and various other kinds of flowers numbering 1,000 each are prepared in honour of a thousand *gāthās*.



Figure 4  
The grand preaching  
seat. Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa.

In the middle of the preaching hall, there is a beautiful and costly preaching seat where a monk takes to recite the *Th. VJ*. It is usually made of bamboo and decorated with shining coloured papers in the shape of seven storeyed pavilion with three windows and one main door. It is a square and is four feet wide. Its height is between 25ft to 27ft. There is a ladder for the preacher to go up. The preaching seat is arranged facing to the east while the ladder is to the south. It takes about three to four weeks to construct a preaching seat for this occasion and the labour would cost about US\$ 250. The preacher sits on this preaching seat facing the east while doing the recitation.



Figure 5  
A painting on the section  
of the six nobles.  
Wat Buddhapadipa, London.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa

In the preaching hall thirteen paintings depicting the life of the Prince Vessantara as narrated in the thirteen sections are hung. The thirteen paintings are intended to be viewed to enhance their faith while listening to the recitation.<sup>15</sup> There are also 100 elephants, made of paper, 100 horses, 100 cows, 100 buffalos, 100 chariots, 100 young female servants, 100 young male servants and 100 gold coins. There are also a thousand Buddhist flags in various colours hanging overhead in the preaching hall. Besides all these, four pots of water have to be prepared to hold holy water and they are placed close to the preaching seat, to ensure its sanctity. A toy of well decorated white elephant and a horse are also placed near the preaching seat. Threads which will be blessed for the ceremony are tied from the Buddha statue and then scattered round the preaching hall. Four store houses are also prepared: the first one is for storing paddy; the second for rice; and the third for gold; and the last for silver. They are all placed also in the preaching hall. Two trees of a thousand flowers made of gold and silver leaves are always arranged when there is a ceremony of the *Th. VJ* recital. Various kinds of offerings for the services of the monks who conduct the ceremony of the recital are also placed properly in the preaching hall.

### 1.6 The ritual aspects of the recital of the *Tham Vessantara-jātaka*

Before the recitation and after the offerings in the preaching hall, a priest, not monk, called in Tai-Khun *Pūchan*, leads main sponsors to make an offering to the guardian spirit of the place including four guardian spirits of the four directions.<sup>16</sup> An offering to the guardian spirit is to be done whenever there are important functions.

<sup>15</sup> *Ngarn Pun Phra Wed Muk Dar Harn*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>16</sup> The guardian of the monastery is called '*Devala Wat*' while the four guardian spirits who look after the four directions are known as '*Daot Tarng Sī*'. They are *Tatharattha*, *Virūlhaka*, *Virūpakha* and *Kuvera*, the four great kings, the *Cātumahārājāno*. *Virūlhaka* is the king of the south direction and the lord of *Kumbhaṇḍas*. *Virūpakha* is the king of the western direction and lord of the *Nāgas*, the serpent like creature on the sea. See 'DPPN', Vol. III, pp. 894-895. *Kuvera* is the king of the northern direction and is the lord of the *Yakkhas*, with a splendid retinue. 'DPPN', Vol. I, p. 650. There are also many other guardians who look after houses, villages and towns and so on. Their names vary depending on the places they look after. For example, if a guardian looks after a house, he is given a name '*Devala Heun*'; one who looks after a village is called '*Devala Warn*' while one who looks after a town is called '*Devala Mong*' and so on.



Figure 6  
Pūchan leading  
Main sponsors offering  
to the guardian spirits.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa

In so doing, people believe the function would go smoothly without any hindrance. This kind of practice is also practised in all parts of Thailand,<sup>17</sup> including the Isarn region.<sup>18</sup> In Isarn, Thailand, a custom is that whenever there is a religious function, Ven. Upagutta, an Arahāt, is invited to the place first.<sup>19</sup> Devotees pay homage to him and offer him food and fruit, lighting candles and scent sticks. They believe this Upagutta is so powerful and will chase away any evil spirit in order to make the function successful. After that there is also an invitation to the good divine beings to come and listen to the recitation and to rejoice and witness this merit-making.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 7  
The presiding monk is  
administering the precepts  
to the lay followers  
before the recitation.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa.

When the recitation is about to begin, the sponsors are asked to light candles and scent sticks. Then all the devotees pay homage to the Triple Gem. The presiding monk will administer the precepts to the devotees, after which sometimes, monks are invited to chant the *Maṅgala-sutta*,<sup>21</sup> in order to purify the offerings as well as to bring them good

<sup>17</sup> This kind of belief is also followed in Thailand. See also the detail of it in *Theṭ Mahā Chāt*, by Anuman Rajadhon, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ngarn Pun Phra Wed Muk Dar Harn*, pp. 50-53. This custom is not found in other parts of Thailand.

<sup>19</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, pp. 162-164.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 164-165.

<sup>21</sup> The *Maṅgala-sutta* of the *Suttanipata* was preached by the Buddha at Jetavana in answer to a question asked by a Deva as to which are the auspicious things in the world. The *sutta* describes thirty eight kinds of auspicious things in daily life. They include not to associate with fools but to associate with the wise, honouring those who are worthy of honour and so on. This *sutta* is often chanted on the occasions, such as

fortune and protect them from misfortune.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes when the donation is meant for the departed parents or relatives, a blessing for them has to be performed. Monks chant selected *suttas*.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the *suttas* merit is shared to the departed ones by pouring libation water to mark the end of the rite. In this case, monks are invited again to chant the *Maṅgala-sutta* to make things purified before starting the recitation. In some places, there is a belief that after monks' chanting the *Maṅgala-sutta*, the spirits or ghosts can not come to receive merit from their relatives. So, a rite is performed to share merit before the chanting is carried out. Another superstitious belief is that when a person dies in an untimely death from an accident, that person can not enter into the monastery to receive his merit performed by his or her relatives. In this case, whenever a relative makes offering on his behalf, a monk is invited to a gate outside the monastery and performs the rite, after which merit is transferred to the departed one.

After these rites have been performed, *Pūchan* invites the monks one by one to come to the preaching seat and start the recitation of each section.



Figure 8  
Pūchan inviting monks  
to recite the *Th. VJ*.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa.

At the end of each recitation, there are sounds of beating a drum or a triangular brass gong to mark an interval before inviting the next monk to come and recite his assigned sections.<sup>24</sup> According to Thai custom, there are sounds of music to mark the interval

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blessing a new house, a new wed couple, opening a new place and so on. Besides these, monks and lay chant this sutta when they pay homage to the Buddha either in the morning or in the evening.

<sup>22</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, pp. 199-208.

<sup>23</sup> Selected *suttas* for the departed ones usually are *petha vatthu*, about the hungry ghosts, the *pāramī*, thirty kinds of perfections, *Uphassa*, *Lokavuddhi*, the welfare of the world and so on.

<sup>24</sup> Beating a triangular brass gong is popular in Burma and every one is reminded of religious practice when they hear this sound. For example, it is usually beat to mark the end of the completion of merit-makings when sharing merit. At the end of the chanting of paying homage to the Triple Gem, people beat it

before inviting the next monk to go to the preaching seat and the music also informs the next sponsors of the sections to be ready to listen to the recitation and to be ready for their offerings to the monks.



Figure 9  
A novice reciting  
the *Th. VJ*.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa

At the end of each recitation, the reciter comes down from the preaching seat and is rewarded with offerings for his service.



Figure 10  
A novice receiving an  
offering for his service.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa.

Thus, the recitation keeps going on until the completion of the whole *Th. VJ*. About fifty or more novices and monks are needed to recite the whole sections of the *Th. VJ*. People, especially the main sponsors of the family, sit in the preaching hall and listen to the recitation. Sometimes, they serve and chat with guests and relatives who occasionally come to listen to the recitation and sometimes, they are busy and hardly have any time to listen to the recitation. They all stay in the temple until the completion of the recitation of the *Th. VJ*.



Figure 11  
Family and relatives greeting  
each other during the ceremony.  
Wat La Mong.  
Photo by Pannyawamsa

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to share merit to the unfortunate ones. It is also beaten to remind people to be ready for their offerings when monks in line go round for alms food.

At the end of the *Nagon*, the last section of the *Th. VJ*, there will be a sermon by a senior monk who usually explains the *Th. VJ* briefly and praises the sponsors for their generosity and its consequences here and now and hereafter. When the sermon is completed, donations to monks conducting the ceremony are made. Then sponsors pour libation water to mark the completion of the ceremony and to share merit to the departed ones.

At the completion of the ceremony, the heads of the sponsors, husband and wife, must not go back home. Instead they have to go out of the town or the village to spend a night. The next day, members of the family and relatives prepare nice food with a festive to welcome them back home.

In conclusion, despite the problems, symptomatic of a more widespread decline in traditional practices in rural and urban communities, the performance of the *Th. VJ*, with all its attendant status and ceremony, still plays a vital part in Kengtung communal life in Eastern Shan State, Burma. The ceremonial recitation of the *Th. VJ* brings together the monastic and lay community, provides an outlet for generosity that is graduated and accommodates both the wealthy and the poor, sustains the practice of sons joining the Saṅgha for sometimes and provides an outlet for a communal celebration of generosity as the cornerstone of Buddhist lay activity.

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