

## **Stupa worship: The early form of Tai religious tourism**

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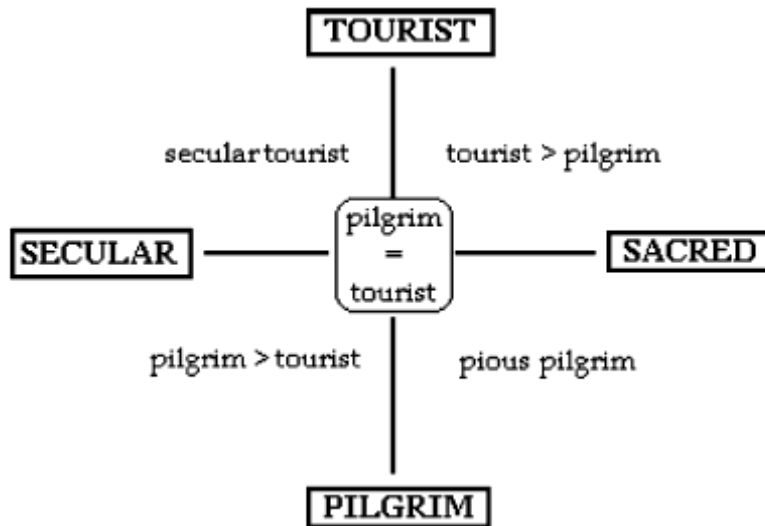
Pilgrimage can be considered an early form of religious tourism because these two share similar aspects. This paper illustrates the relationship of pilgrimage and tourism along side with the case of stupa worship, which was an early form of both the pilgrimage and tourism of Tai. The 'Tai' in this context refers to those who share the Lanna cultural aspects such as Tai Lanna, Tai Lue, Tai Yai, Tai Khuen, and Laos.

### **Pilgrimage as religious tourism**

Pilgrimage is the religious phenomena existing in all main religions of the world; Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islamism. Barber (1993,p.1) defined pilgrimage as a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding'. Leeming and Odajnyk (2001,p.269) suggested that the pilgrimage involved in three essential steps. The first step involves the significant separation of the pilgrimage from home and ordinary life and the journey to the sacred centre. The separation can be identified with cloths, ritual or any unusual behaviour. The second step is the interaction with the sacred such as some ritual acts. The third step is the return home, which is always marked by a sense of renewal.

Pilgrimage has often been linked with tourism. It can be said that the pilgrimage can be seen as the earliest form of traveling (Cohen,2004). In tourism context, most researchers refer to the pilgrim as religious tourists (e.g.,Turner and Turner,1978;Kaplan and Bar-On,1991;Smith,1989,1992).One of the reasons is that the pilgrimage provides the mix of pious and pleasure state through the course of the travel. With the exceptional of the devotional aspect, pilgrimage involves sightseeing, traveling and visiting different places. Besides, the nature of tourist experience shares some similarity with the pilgrimage essential steps. For example, MacCannell (1973) claimed that the tourist can be compared to the modern day pilgrim because they took the journey to experience the quest for the authenticity (MacCannell, 1973 cited in Collins-Kreiner and Kliot,2000). Graburn (1989) also described tourism as a sacred journey in the sense that it was the situation which individual escaped from the secular everyday world to the land of play (Graburn, 1989 cited in Collins-Kreiner, N. and Kliot).

Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000 cited in Singh, 2005, p.216) developed the model explaining the characteristics of the pilgrim in the holy land and provided two continuum of pilgrim and tourism. They are secularism-sacredness and tourism-pilgrimage.



### The pilgrimage of Tai to worship stupa

In the early day, generally, Tai people were not the traveler like the Westerner who sought for the new adventure or the new land. The long journey for Tai was mainly for trading purpose and most of the traders were men. There was hardly a chance for women or layman to travel in a long journey until the pilgrimage to worship stupa took place in 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The sacred journey was undertaken mainly for the religious purpose. However, leisure purpose was evidenced. The next part illustrates the early form of pilgrimage and religious tourism of Tai involving the visit to the stupa.

In Buddhism, the abstract symbol of Lord Buddha is the Buddhist doctrine while the concrete ones are stupa containing relic and hair of Lord Buddha, foot-print and bed of Lord Buddha. In 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the stupas were widely constructed by Tai rulers due to the belief that these constructions would enlighten them. Since stupa was, the sacred representative of Lord Buddha, Buddhist who live both in Thailand and other countries took the pilgrimage to worship stupas with the belief that this journey would protect themselves from all forms of danger. The pilgrimage to the stupas not only widely practiced among the layman but also among the Tai rulers.

As a matter of fact, the pilgrimage to worship the stupas was the compulsory annual custom of the Tai rulers and royals because they were the patrons of Buddhism. One of the examples about the annual pilgrimage of the Tai royals was portrayed in Khlong Niras Hariphunchai. 'Niras' is the Thai literary work describing a voyage. In this Niras, there is the description of Prince royal of Chiangmai and his mother visiting the Hariphunchai Stupa in Lamphoon (Khlong Niras Hariphunchai, 1973, p.159-160). Since then, it was considered the strict duty for every ruler of Chiangmai to take care and worship this stupa.

According to Srisawat (2004), in Laos kingdom, two rules of fourteen rules for the king mentioned about worshipping the stupa. They are;

'Rule number 11: in the 11<sup>th</sup> month of the year, the king had to worship Jomsri stupa as annual ceremony in order that the kingdom would be peaceful and prosperous.

Rule number 12: in the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the year, the king had a duty to gather all population under his reign including the minority ethnic groups into Luang Pra Bang and take a pilgrimage to worship the Sridhammasokaraj stupa'.

Rule number twelve stated that this pilgrimage would encourage populations from various ethnic background to meet and befriend with each other. There were also 3 days celebrations at the stupa with various entertainment such as fireworks, light rockets and many kinds of live performances'.

Another example is from the book 'The Customs and rules of the Cao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueng Sing' (cited in Grabowsky and Wichasin, R, 2007, p 212-213). It is stated that;

'on the full moon day of the first month the people come together for the procession with the *cao fa* up to worship the great stupa of Chiang Tuem. There they stay for one night and then light rockets and firework, according to the will of everyone in all monasteries, villages and towns. Then the people amuse themselves throughout the night'

From 'Twilight over Burma' (Sargent, 1994), it is stated that there was ceremony of worshipping Bawgyo stupa as annual custom. Bawgyo is near of the town of Hsipaw in Northern Shan State. The ceremony was set in full moon of March. People from all over Shan State gathered together to worship this stupa containing the four holy images of Lord Buddha and attend the seven day ceremony (Wichasin, R. 2007) Cao Fa of Hsipaw had to attend as compulsory duty. This custom continued until the last Cao Fa before the declination of the Cao Fa system in Myanmar.

It is clearly seen from the example that apart from the sacred ceremony, there was the entertaining ceremony. Therefore, the stupa could be considered as the visitor attractions in tourism sense. Besides, 'Niras' portrayed the beautiful scenery, entertaining activities, attractions along the way giving the picture of geography, society and culture of local areas on the way to the stupa. This can be compared to the touristic travel.

As for the transportation in those day, the pilgrims travelled by boat, walking, carts or elephants. Regarding to the land methods, when people started moving from origin point to destination, there would be more and more people joined the pilgrimage along the way. Thus, small groups of pilgrims would turn into the big caravan. Concerning to the accommodation of the pilgrims, layman stayed at the temple or at relatives'. Sometimes, they even stayed with someone whom they were not well acquainted with. The hosts always supported this religious activity with the reason that they had a chance to play the part in this sacred journey. Although they did not have a chance to join the pilgrimage, at least they could kindly offer the accommodation to the pilgrims.

In regard to location of stupa, it was mostly built on the higher ground or the mountain. This can be caused by the old belief before the Buddhism era about respecting the nature, mountain and animism. Later on, people mixed the old belief with Buddhism. Thus, the concrete symbols of Lord Buddha were mostly situated on the mountain. The scholar also believed that the construction of stupas on the mountain was part of the culture of people who live in upper part of Northern Thailand. According to the survey of Aksorndit (2002), it is found that there are 66 stupas around that areas. Therefore, Tai who were influenced by Lanna culture called this pilgrimage as 'Khuen That' ( ขึ้นธาตุ), which means climbing to worship the stupa in the higher ground. They do not use the word 'Wai That' ( ไหว้ธาตุ) which means that paying a respect to the stupa.

The popular time for the pilgrimage to 'Khuen That' was either before growing the paddy farming or after the harvest time. It is the 'Songkran Day', which is regarded as the first day of the year in Thai context. People visited stupa to worship and to pour water to it. In the past, people would use the bunch of flowers or leaves dip into the kaffir lime water and fluttered them to the stupa. In this day, the temple use high

technology by using the machine to help in pouring water to stupa from the top to base. In addition, there is also the ceremony of pouring water on a Buddha image.

### **The benefits of pilgrimage**

1. It created faith among the big group of population irrespectively to ethnic background. Everyone had the same faith, belief and precepts. There was no difference in social class. Besides, this sacred journey allowed everyone to intermix. This could create the good relationship among race, society and culture in village level, town level and country level (Aksorndit, 2002 , p. 326-327). Pilgrimage encouraged a chance to do activities together such as renovating the stupa, cooking for making a merit and eating together. It was also a chance to exchange culture of hosts and guests.
2. Religiously, the pilgrimage to stupas helped in warding off danger and recreate prosperous in life. Apart from that, these religious interrelationships among people from different towns helped to smooth the commercial relationship in the sense that the pilgrimage open the path for trading purpose.
3. Pilgrimage gave the religious benefit and the tourism benefit at the same time in the sense that the pilgrim could enjoy the touristic attraction all the way to the stupa and they could worship the sacred stupa when reaching there. Besides, there were ceremonies at the stupa to entertain the pilgrim.
4. Pilgrimage can be the motive for writing the travel literature and romantic literature describing the beautiful scenery along the way of the pilgrimage. Some pieces of works turned into the classic literature.
5. The worship of sacred stupa and donation created happiness and the belief that they would go to heaven after death. Therefore, people would do good deeds for the sake of their afterlife.
6. Traditionally, women and the elderly stayed at home and took care of the family. Therefore, the pilgrimage was the only chance for women and the elderly to travel outside the village. They can either travel in groups of their own or with families. This pilgrim also allowed women and elderly to intermingle with others and attend both religious and other activities.

### **The rise of the stupa worship in relation to birth year**

In the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century, in Lanna cultural areas, there has been the idea of worshipping the stupas in relation to their symbol of birth year. Thai people give importance to the birth time due to the belief that it can be the information for predicting or foretelling the future of that person. In Lanna astrology, there is the conceptions of animals as symbols of each birth year of the twelve- year cycle. It is called 'Naksat'. Thus, twelve animals are symbolised and therefore, in relation to pilgrimage, twelve stupas were visited for worshipping. These stupas are mostly situated in the Northern part of Thailand. The table below shows the relationship of Naksat and the stupas which are linked to these animals.

| <b>Naksat</b>             | <b>Stupas they should pay a visit</b>  |
|---------------------------|--|
| The year of the Rat       | Jom Thong, Chiangmai , Thailand  |
| The year of the Ox        | Lampang Luang, Lampang, Thailand   |
| The year of the Tiger     | Cho-Hae, Prae, Thailand  |
| The year of the Rabbit    | Chae-Haeng, Nan, Thailand  |
| The year of the Big Snake | Phra-Sing or the image of Lord Buddha called 'Phra Phuddha Si Hing', Chiang - mai, Thailand  |
| The year of the Snake     | Buddhagaya, India or The Bodhi Tree or Jet Yod temple, Chiangmai, Thailand   |
| The year of the Horse     | Shwedagon, Myanmar   |
| The year of the Goat      | Doi Su Thep, Chiangmai, Thailand   |
| The year of the Monkey    | Pha-nom, Nakhonphanom, Thailand  |
| The year of the Cock      | Hariphunchai,Lampoon, Thailand   |
| The year of the Dog       | Ket Kaew Chula Manee in heaven. However, it is allowed to pay a visit to Ket Ka Ram temple, Chiangmai, Thailand, or Kyaihtiyo, Myanmar |
| The year of the Pig       | Doi Tung, Chiangrai, Thailand  |

Aksorndit (2002) suggested that this belief was encouraged by Lanna people in order to resist the strong intention of Siam to capture Lanna. The Lanna people wanted to show their potentiality to Siam that they had their own culture and belief. Later on, when Lanna became part of Siam, this belief faded away by time. The practice was only practiced among Lanna royals and monks.

This belief became popular again after Kru Ba Sri Wi Chai, the very respectful monk in Lanna area, revived it. He was born in the year of Tiger and he visited Cho-Hae stupa at Prae. He also brought the small Tiger made from wood to the stupa as an act of respect. Then, people started to wonder which stupa they should visit in relation to their birth year. Then, they started to visit those stupas again. However, this belief declined after the death of Kru Ba Sri Wi Chai.

The popularity of the visit to the birth year Stupa has revived again in the past 5 years because there have been more researches and promotions about it. However, the intention to go to worship the birth year stupa is not the main motivation for travelling due to the fact that there are other natural and man made tourist attractions in the area. It can be said that most of tourists travel to the area to visit the tourist attractions and insert the stupa worship in one of the programme if that stupa is related to their Naksat. For example, Jom Thong stupa is situated on the way to Inthanon mountain which is the highest mountain of Thailand. So, people who are born on the year of Rat tend to stop by and pay a respect. It can be considered that the visit to Jom Thong stupa is motivated by religious purpose before visiting Inthanon for the touristic purpose.

Another example is the town Chiangmai, Thailand. There are five stupas which are related to the Naksat. However, only Doi Suthep is the most popular one for the visitor because of its touristic quality. Most of the package tour to Chiangmai always includes Doi Suthep in the programme apart from visiting the handicraft village, natural resorts, orchid farm, elephant farm and trekking. It is shown that visiting Doi Suthep is not for the religious purpose anymore but the touristic one.

Apart from the change in motivation of the visit to stupa, the time of the visit also changes. In the past, stupa worship was the sacred journey attending by people who gathered together for religious purpose in some certain time of the year. It is like tourism without any promotion because everyone knows the time of the annual ceremony. In contrast, in this day, the journey was individually made rather than the group practice due to the time availability, development of infrastructure and the transport availability. With the improvement of the road to the stupa, it reduces the time spending on travelling there. Also, the automobile makes the journey more flexible. People can choose to travel anytime of the year. Therefore, the journey to the birth year stupas takes place anytime they are available rather than waiting until

the ceremony time. Less and less people gather together for the ceremony of stupa worship because individual travel by their own transport.

In summary, the pilgrimage can be regarded as the religious tourism because these two share the similar aspects such as the experience from the journey, the sightseeing and the entertainment. Pilgrimage not only provides spiritual purpose but also the entertaining purpose at the same time. Stupa worship is the very early form of pilgrimage or religious tourism of Tai. The core of the pilgrimage to worship stupa, which is to take a sacred journey to a sacred place of importance to a person's belief and faith, still remains the same. However, nowadays, people travel for travel's sake visiting the tourist attraction for touristic purpose. The visit to the stupa is not the main motivation for travel anymore. However, in the present day, the Tourism Authority of Thailand continuously promotes this belief so that people will visit all of these stupas, not only the one which has the touristic quality. The booklet about twelve stupas in relation to the Naksat is published and widely distributed. Besides, internet site is the good channel to promote the twelve important stupas extensively. It is predictable that there is a potential that the visit to the birth year stupa will be in favoured again.

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