

War of Authenticity: Religious Competition among Indonesian Buddhists

Jesada Buaban

Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia 55281, Indonesia

(Corresponding author's e-mail: jesada.tee@gmail.com)

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Abstract

This paper traces the competition among Buddhist denominations in Indonesia, focusing on the Thai missionaries, the Theravada Sangha, and the Buddhayana. Previous studies found that the conflict among Buddhists is based on scriptural interpretations, while this paper argues that in everyday practice, philosophical debate is not much important, comparing to tangible identity and ways of ritual performance. To answer the question when scriptural debates are not considered important in daily life, what are the reasons used to promote authentic Buddhism in their own versions among Indonesian Buddhists? Using ethnographic method and documentary analysis, this article shows that claims of authenticity can be initiated not only through scriptural debates or rationalizations of Buddhism, as Natalie Quli suggests, but also through the sacred power of meditation and being tolerant Buddhists who practice non-sectarian Buddhism.

Keywords: Authentic Buddhism, Buddhayana, Buddhist modernity, Intra-religious conflict, Thai missionary

Introduction

Buddhism in Indonesia has been intervened by the government since the 1950s to support the nation-building process. In 1958, under the Sukarno regime, Chinese people were forced to choose between Chinese and Indonesian citizenship (Setiono, 2008, p. 751), and in 1959, those who were not Indonesian citizens were prohibited from doing business outside urban areas (PERPRES, 1959). However, the situation during the New Order of the Suharto regime (1966-1998) worsened, when the Pancasila ideology was used as a tool to ensure political stability and security, where religion (*agama*) and ethnicity (*suku*) were restricted (Hoon, 2006, p. 151). Chinese culture, language, and politics were marginalized and eliminated (Heryanto, 1999, p. 326 and Setijadi, 2016, p. 4). These policies forced Buddhism, one of the religions practiced by Chinese, to adapt to the requirements of the state. In 1966, Chinese places of worship (*kelenteng*) were forced to change their names to Pali/Sanskrit to make their identities less Chinese (Suryadinata, 2014, p. 32).

Buddhists were also asked to adopt the concept of the One Supreme God (*Ketuhanan*) to strengthen their belief in the first Pancasila, which led to the use of the

term '*Adi-Buddha*' meaning Primordial Buddha or Supreme God in Buddhism. This term was proposed by Jinarakkhita, the founder of Buddhayana and his team. *Adi-Buddha* finally makes Buddhism being officially recognized by the government in 1975 (Chia, 2018, p. 58). This concept of the One God is depicted in the scripture '*Sanghyang Kamahayanikan*', a Javanese (Tantra) Buddhist text written around the 10th century (Utomo, 2018, p. 255). According to Ishii (1984, p. 113), the term *Sang Hyang Adi-Buddha* was first coined as a concept of God in Buddhism in May 1965, four months before the 30 September Movement in 1965. At that time, this concept helped Buddhism to be free from accusations of atheism and communism. Nonetheless, for scholars such as Abdul Syukur (2022), Edij Juangari, 2022, Jack Meng-Tat Chia, 2018, and Bunki Kimura (2003), disagreement with the *Adhi-Buddha* concept has caused internal conflict among Indonesian Buddhists over time. Simply put, Buddhists who disagree with the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* as initiated by Buddhayana use this theological reason to separate themselves from Buddhayana and continue to criticize Buddhayana so far.

Objectives and methodology

Having scrutinized the conflict of Indonesian Buddhists, the aim of this paper is to argue that the conflict among Indonesian Buddhists is not mainly from the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* as assumed. Through an ethnographic method for three years (2022-2024) in Central Java, informal interviews with monks and laypeople and participant observations in rituals of the main three groups of Buddhists namely Buddhayana, Indonesian Theravada Sangha (*Sangha Theravada Indonesia: STI*), and Thai missionary, were conducted. Consensus from informants were allowed meanwhile some also suggested to use the pseudonyms to avoid the conflict. This paper questions when the debate on scriptures is not considered important in daily life, what are the reasons caused the conflict and has been employed to promote authentic Buddhism among Theravada, Buddhayana, and Thai missionaries?

This paper is divided into two parts; (1) *Bukan Tuhan tapi Tuan: Rejection of Buddhayana for trans-traditional practices* discusses the key factors that led Theravada and Mahayana to split from Buddhayana. Data collected from archives, Buddhist magazines, and Dhamma books are used as sources. This part focuses on religious conflicts among Indonesian Buddhists in the 1970s-1990s, which will argue that the main cause of the Buddhist schism was criticism of cross-traditional practices such as Theravada monks chanting Mahayana Sutras, rather than theological debates. Part (2) *Claims of Authenticity in Public Rituals* analyzes the ways in which Theravada, Buddhayana, and Thai missionaries struggled to find networks and used Borobudur as a public space to express their identity. The purpose of this part is to show the competition of these groups from 2000-2024, meanwhile ethnographic methods were adopted in 2022-2024 in Central Java. The author lived with monks and lay members of each group, helped prepare rituals, and attended their ceremonies. Informal interviews with monks and laypeople, as well as participant observation are used in this part.

Relying on the conceptual definitions of modern Buddhism given by Quli (2009), this paper will argue that Buddhayana and Thai missionaries have other tools to promote their modern forms of Buddhist authenticity. According to Quli (2009, pp. 11-12), modern Buddhism since the nineteenth century has had distinct characteristics such as (1) promoting rationality, (2)

philosophy rather than religion, (3) raising the status of women, (4) laity becoming more prominent, (5) meditation is the main practice, (6) Nirvana is in the present life, (7) interest in social engagement, (8) rejection of ritual, superstition, folk religion, (9) returning to the Pali canon and understanding doctrine and texts as more important than chanting and relic worship, (10) democracy is central.

This paper shows that only the Indonesian Theravada Sangha claims to emphasize the Pali scriptures (No. 9), while Thai missionaries, although using meditation as their identity (No. 5), but not in the modern psychosocial meaning as found in the West, instead, they do not hesitate to describe meditation as a sacred power, which belongs to the forest monks, difficult to be practiced in everyday life. In addition, Buddhayana tends not to reject folk traditions and beliefs (No.8), but rather uses them as a method to support spiritual development.

Results

Bukan Tuhan tapi Tuan: The rejection of Buddhayana because of trans-traditional practice

This section provides data from books and field research to argue that the concept of God or *Adi-Buddha* is not the biggest issue that separates Theravada from Buddhayana. That is because even though they may disagree with the term '*Adi-Buddha*' or '*Dharmakaya*' and prefer other words like '*Nibbana*', the meaning is still the same, and more importantly they get benefit from the government recognition of Buddhism that Jinarakkhita and his team have done. Moreover, evidence from the daily practices of Theravada and Mahayana followers shows that they are more concerned with monastic rituals such as how to worship than theological debates. This part is titled, *Bukan Tuhan tapi Tuan*, which means 'not God but Boss', implying that they just do not want to be under Jinarakkhita's control.

According to Syukur (2022), Juangari (2022), Chia (2018), and Kimura (2003), the disagreement of the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* led to schism of the Sangha. On October 23, 1976, at Maha Dhammaloka Vihara (now known as Vihara Tanah Putih), Semarang, Central Java, several monks, namely: Bhikkhu Aggabalo, Bhikkhu Khemasarano, Bhikkhu Sudhammo, Bhikkhu Khemiyo and Bhikkhu Nanavutto,

also the support of laypeople like Suratin MS, Mochtar Rasyid, and so on established the Indonesian Theravada Sangha (Sangha Theravada Indonesia: STI), separated from Buddhayana (Samaggiphala, 2016). For Syukur (2022), Juangari (2022), Chia (2018), and Kimura (2003), Theravada monks cannot accept the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* as God or *Tuhan* in Buddhism. The word '*Nibbana*' or 'cessation of suffering' from Udana 8.3 of the Pali Tipitaka, as being read 'there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated, escape from the born, become, made, fabricated is discerned' is used by the Theravada group instead.

Of the five monks, only Bhikkhu Nanavutto is a product of Indonesia, while the other four were ordained in Thailand, with the assistance of Win Vijjano, the first Thai missionary leader who reached Indonesia in 1969 at the invitation of Jinarakkhita (Buaban, 2018, p. 134). Of course, this kind of arrival was not solely for religious missions, but also received support from the Royal Thai Embassy in Jakarta. So, this helped Thai monks to establish relations with the Indonesian government as well. And this is a reason why Thai missionaries have played a major role in the national Waisak (Visak for International) in Borobudur so far (will be discussed in detail in the next part).

Aggabalo (also known as Cornelis Wowor), one of the key figures in STI, was a graduate of Mahamakut Buddhist University in Bangkok and deeply influenced by Thai Theravada Buddhism. He explained that the motivation behind forming STI was not to rival other organizations, but rather to guide laypeople and teach Buddhism strictly according to the Pali Tipitaka—something he believed no other group was doing (Samaggiphala, 2016). According to Harpin (2009), Bhikkhu Win had been encouraging young Indonesians to ordain in Thailand since the 1970s, without seeking Jinarakkhita's permission. Although this deeply disappointed Jinarakkhita, he chose not to respond. This development can be seen as a strategy to release Indonesian monks from Jinarakkhita's power. As a missionary, Win may have viewed his role as simply extending the opportunity to ordain abroad. Eventually, within a decade, Indonesian monks ordained in Thailand's Dhammayutta tradition grew strong enough to break away from Buddhayana and form their own organization, STI.

Since 1976, the justification commonly used by Theravada monks to divide the Sangha has consistently centered on claims of purity in monastic discipline. Specifically, the Thai Dhammayutta tradition strongly asserts that it represents the most authentic and purified form of Theravada Buddhism, a lineage reformed by King Rama IV in 1833 (Promta, 1999). In Thailand, Dhammayutta monks, though a minority, maintain close ties to the royal family and often exclude Mahanikaya monks (the majority order) from their rituals, arguing that the Mahanikaya lineage lacks doctrinal purity—particularly in terms of ordination practices not strictly following the Pali scriptures. As a result, they sometimes dismiss Mahanikaya monks as not being truly ordained. This sense of exclusivity is often shared by Indonesian monks who were ordained in the Dhammayutta tradition. Upon returning to Indonesia, they frequently express discomfort participating in ceremonies with Buddhayana monks, including Jinarakkhita, even though both groups identify with the Theravada tradition.

Narada, a Sri Lankan monk who had been active in Indonesia since 1934, exemplifies those who rejected the concept of God in Buddhism. He once sent a letter to Parwati, a close supporter of Jinarakkhita, stating, "please tell your teacher that there is no God in Buddhism" (Juangari, 2022, p. 151). This reflects the stance of modern Theravada Buddhism, particularly shaped by its responses to Christian missionary activity in places like Sri Lanka and Thailand (Winichakul, 2015, p. 92). However, there is no indication that this disagreement led to a rupture in Narada's relationship with Jinarakkhita. In fact, within the Thai Theravada tradition, which had been engaging with Jinarakkhita since the 1960s, there was a more accommodating view. Laurence Kantipalo, a monk who accompanied Thailand's Supreme Patriarch Sasana Sobhana to ordain five monks at Borobudur in 1970, described Jinarakkhita's interpretation as a "wise compromise" (Suprajitno, 2019, p. 350). This suggests that Thai Theravada circles were aware of the contextual needs and did not criticize Jinarakkhita for incorporating such ideas.

The concept of God was not initially a point of contention raised by the Indonesian Theravada Sangha (STI). An examination of the letter addressed to the Director of the Thai Missionary Center at Wat

Bowornnives Vihara (see Figure 1) reveals that the primary concern was related to Jinarakkhita and the Buddhayana movement's adherence to monastic discipline. The letter criticized their practices as inconsistent with Theravada monastic codes and as incorporating elements from the Mahayana tradition. Specifically, paragraphs 3 and 4 highlight these concerns.

“Considering that the Theravada tradition is still in its early stages, there are no expert seniors (Thera or Mahathera). We humbly request that Your Holiness temporarily extend the assignment to Ven. Chaokhun Vedhurdhammabhorn (Win), to assist in expanding the investigation and refinement of Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia, and during his stay here we are responsible for assisting him in all matters.

It is to be informed to your honorable sir that Ven. Jinarakkhita, although ordained as a monk and wore the robes of the Theravada, has said that his new teaching is the so-called ‘Buddhayana’ which is claimed to be the Indonesian version of the Mahayana school, in which teachings and monastic codes are highly different from the Theravada tradition.”

From the letter, it can be said that before the official separation from Buddhayana on October 23, 1976, STI members prepared themselves to fully become part of the Thai Theravada tradition, through missionary monks in Indonesia led by Win Vijjano.

Debates surrounding the concept of God among Buddhist groups gained prominence after the Suharto era, when greater freedom of religious expression became possible. Jayamedho, a monk affiliated with STI, expressed his disagreement with the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* as a Personal God—an idea promoted by Buddhayana—in his autobiography *Menapak Pasti: Kisah Spiritual Anak Madura* (Jayamedho, 2011, p. 194). In contrast, Sudhamek, a prominent figure within the Buddhayana community, clarified that their understanding of God is not anthropomorphic. He explained that *Adi-Buddha* should be understood as Dharmakaya or a form of divinity (*ketuhanan*), rather

than as a personal deity (*tuhan*). Nevertheless, the concept of Dharmakaya bears attributes that align with certain elements of Abrahamic notions of God (Buddhayana TV, 2021). For Jinarakkhita, using terms like *Adi-Buddha* or Dharmakaya was more acceptable than Nibbana, particularly in addressing the religious framework expected by the Indonesian government (Kimura, 2003, p. 65).

Jayamedho, once a follower of Jinarakkhita, expressed strong disapproval upon seeing Jinarakkhita wearing a Mahayana robe in 1970 at Vihara Sakyavanaram, Bogor. In his writings, he criticized this act by drawing a comparison to military uniforms—arguing that just as the air force and navy have distinct attire, each Buddhist tradition—Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—has its own specific monastic dress code, and monks should remain faithful to their respective traditions (Jayamedho, 2011, pp. 194–195). This matter touches on a broader sensitivity within global Buddhist communities. Even organizations like the World Buddhist Sangha Council (WBSC), which promote unity and pluralism, emphasize the importance of maintaining a distinct identity. They advocate inter-traditional learning and cooperation (Goonewardene, 2010), yet maintain that ritual practices should align with one's own lineage to prevent syncretism. Jayamedho also criticized cross-traditional practices, such as Theravada monks performing Mahayana rituals or venerating figures like Sai Baba—the Indian spiritual leader—as seen in Jinarakkhita's activities and those of Buddhayana monks. He regarded such actions as inappropriate and problematic.

Importantly, Jinarakkhita was entitled to wear the Mahayana robe for two key reasons: (1) although he was ordained in the Theravada tradition, he had previously been a novice in a Mahayana lineage, and (2) he had received the Bodhisattva vows from the Mahayana tradition (Chia, 2018). Thus, his actions did not violate any formal monastic rules. However, his choice was criticized within the framework of modern Buddhist expectations, which emphasize fixed and singular identities. In reality, Jinarakkhita consistently wore Theravada robes, even when participating in Mahayana ceremonies. According to his close disciples, Dharmawimala and Nyanakusalo (July 17, 2024: Interviews), he donned Mahayana robes only occasionally—and only at the request of followers

wanting to take photographs. Unfortunately, once those photos began circulating, many assumed he frequently

switched robes, leading to misunderstandings about his commitment to a specific tradition.

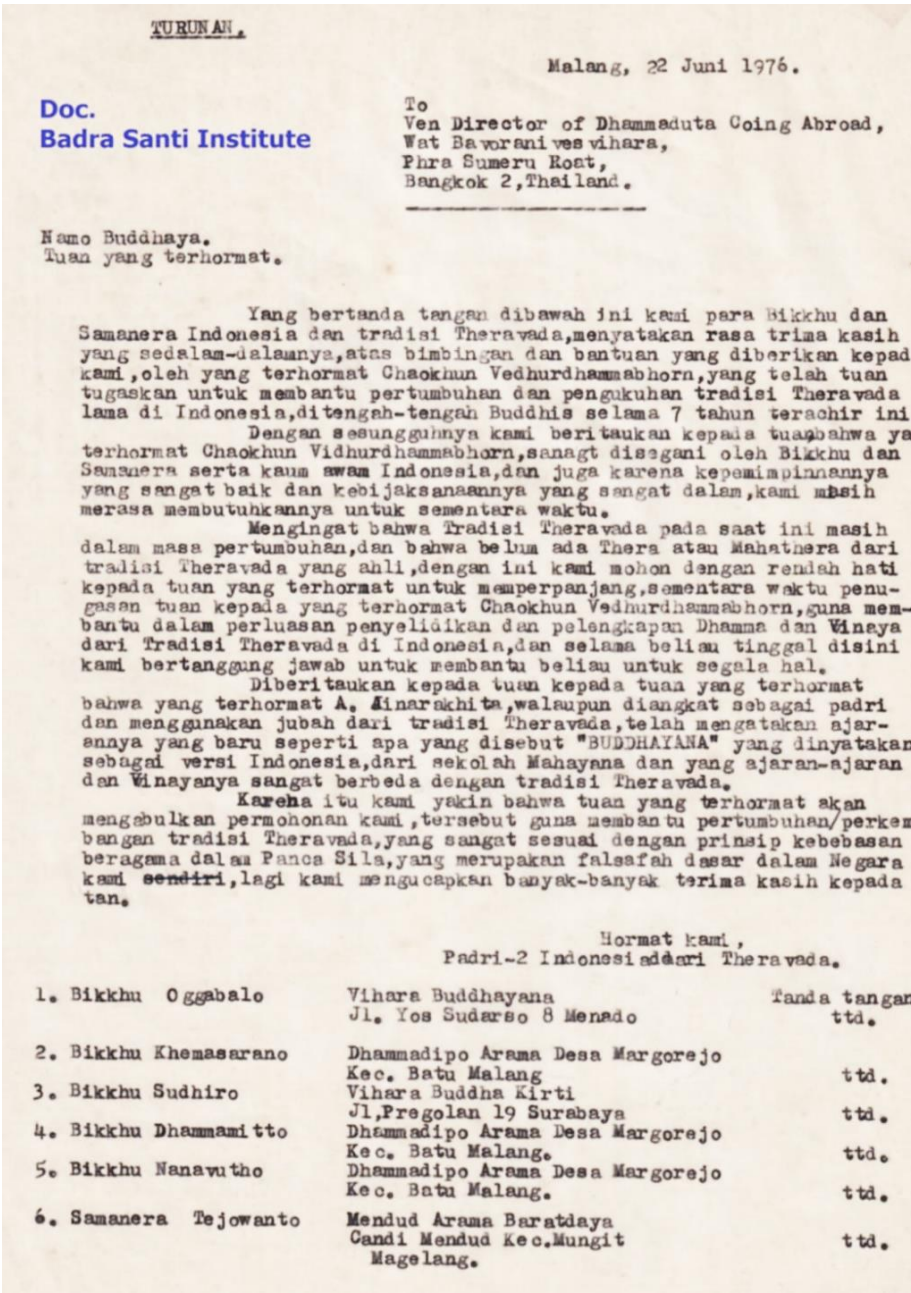


Figure 1 Letter of STI to the Thai Missionary Center reporting about the monastic syncretism of Buddhayana
Source: Badra Santi Institute

During my fieldwork in Temanggung, Central Java—a region where Theravada Buddhism predominates—I frequently encountered critical narratives about the Buddhayana tradition. For instance, Sujitto (June 28, 2024: Interview) shared a common story among Theravada communities: that some Buddhayana monks would change into Mahayana robes

when they wished to have dinner, and switch back to Theravada robes when consuming meat. According to Sujitto, there were monks who were Theravada one day and Mahayana the next. These types of anecdotes circulate widely in Theravada villages, reflecting skepticism toward the fluidity of identities within Buddhayana. It is important to understand, however,

that such perceptions often overlook the actual practices of Buddhayana leaders. Jinarakkhita, for example, was committed to a non-sectarian approach—he observed Theravada discipline by not eating after noon, while also embracing Mahayana values by following a vegetarian diet. His practice was therefore quite strict and cannot fairly be criticized.

While it is true that some monks have transitioned between traditions, it is not as casual as the rumors suggest. A case in point is Bhiksu Bhadrabhakti, a monk from Lombok who was originally ordained in the Theravada tradition. In 2017, at his teacher's request, he formally entered the Mahayana tradition to serve a Mahayana community. This transition required him to undergo a specific ritual and take the Bodhisattva vows—it was far more than merely changing robes (Bhadrabhakti, June 11, 2019: Interview). These examples demonstrate that, in everyday practice, the primary distinction between Theravada and Buddhayana does not revolve around the concept of God. Instead, Theravada monks often assert that their tradition is more authentic than that of Jinarakkhita and the Buddhayana community, which they criticize for blending different traditions. This claim of authenticity has frequently been used to attract followers who are uncomfortable with the cross-traditional rituals practiced within Buddhayana.

The establishment of Indonesian Buddhist Association (*Perwalian Umat Buddha Indonesia: Walubi*) in Yogyakarta in 1978 opened a platform for different groups of Buddhists to work together. Walubi can be seen as from the government's goal to control or ensure that various Buddhist groups were under one umbrella and based their beliefs on Almighty God, prophets, and religious scriptures, as with other Abrahamic religions (Buaban, 2018, p. 141). However, after the fall of Suharto in May 1998, this organization also collapsed. Hartati Murdaya, the former leader of Walubi, had restored it in the same year, with the support of the Jusuf Habibi's government. Interestingly, its name had been changed to *Perwalian Umat Buddha Indonesia* (Indonesian Buddhist Trust, still abbreviated as Walubi).

An organization led by a layperson, especially a powerful woman like Hartati, seemed not to be accepted by monks, so they refused to join the new Walubi. Monks from Mahayana, Theravada and Buddhayana

agreed to initiate a federation of their monasteries called the Supreme Sangha Council of Indonesia (*Konferensi Agung Sangha Indonesia: Kasi*) on November 14, 1998 (Bhagavant, 2024). Of course, they were always in competition and conflict, but to be under the big organization, after leaving Walubi, was important in the atmosphere that religious minority groups needed the power in negotiation and gain more security (Bhikkhu Sujato, July 18, 2024: Interview). Unlike those Indonesian monastic groups, the Thai missionary monks decided to join the Walubi. As mentioned, the Thai monks also have close relationships with the Royal Thai Embassy as well as the Indonesian government. Therefore, the decision to support Walubi, especially an important person like Hartati, of Thai monks is not merely from their want, but also the political relationship of the elites.

The role of Thai monks in Indonesia has evolved significantly over time. Initially, in 1969, they served as assistants to Jinarakkhita, effectively placing them within the Buddhayana movement. However, with the founding of the Indonesian Theravada Sangha (STI) in 1976—comprising primarily disciples of Bhikkhu Win—the Thai monks aligned themselves with STI. Later, in 1998, when Bhikkhu Win chose to support Hartati, Thai monks transitioned to become part of Walubi and took on leadership roles in the Indonesian Theravada Buddhist Assembly (*Majelis Umat Buddha Theravada Indonesia, or Majubuthi*). This shift explains why Thai monks have continued to play a prominent role in the international Waisak celebrations at Borobudur.

Claim of authenticity in public rituals

This part explores the public ritual activities of three major monastic groups: The Thai missionaries affiliated with Walubi, who have led the national Waisak celebrations at Borobudur for over twenty years; the Theravada Sangha (STI), which established the Tipitaka Chanting Project at the site; and the Buddhayana organization, which relocated its Maghapuja celebration to the Borobudur area as a statement of identity. Each of these groups employs its own strategies to gain access to the Borobudur complex, often by asserting their version of authentic Buddhism to attract followers. While these rituals have not achieved full unity among Indonesian Buddhists, the

fairest approach would be to allow each group the equal right to conduct their own ritual traditions at Borobudur. It is important to note that such religious interpretations and practices have significantly expanded since the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998, a period marked by Indonesia's shift toward greater democracy and increased religious freedom.

Thai missionary's hegemony of National Waisak

Waisak (for Indonesia) or Vesak (for international) is a celebration to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha Shakyamuni. In Indonesia, Waisak has been celebrated since the colonial era. In 1929, the first Waisak was celebrated at the Giri Lojo Center in Bandung, West Java, by the Theosophy Society (Yulianti, 2020, p. 170). Meanwhile in 1932, with the cooperation of the Theosophy Society and Chinese immigrants, Waisak was held in Mendut and Borobudur, Central Java (Brown, 2004, p. 51). Since 1955, the Waisak celebration at Borobudur has been led by Jinarakkhita, a newly ordained Theravada monk. This marked a shift, as native monastics began to take a central role in organizing Waisak, which had previously been managed by lay scholars. The following year, in 1956, Waisak was held as the significant 2500 Buddha Jayanti celebration, marking what is considered the midpoint of Buddhism. The event attracted Buddhists from multiple countries and was attended by embassy representatives, thereby elevating Waisak to an international stage and reinforcing the perception of Buddhism as a global religion—beyond its association with just Chinese or Javanese communities (Chia, 2020, p. 126). Furthermore, the rational interpretation of Buddhism—such as criticizing the practice of worshipping Buddha or deities for fortune and instead emphasizing ethical conduct and meditation—reflects the modern character of Buddhism expressed during the Waisak celebration (Buaban et al., 2024).

However, the Waisak holiday was recognized by the Indonesian government in 1983, which was also an effort of Walubi under the leadership of General Soemantri who was then the Director General (Juangari, 2022, p. 214). It can be said that from 1955-1998 Waisak belonged to Indonesian monks, especially Buddhayana led by Jinarakkhita and Theravada led by Girirakkhita. When the old Walubi collapsed, the new Walubi, Hartati as the Director General, still celebrates the national

Waisak in Borobudur, which is led by Thai missionary monks, although for some years it was regulated by Kasi due to negotiations. However, since 1999 onwards, Waisak in Borobudur has been managed by Thai monks from Dhammayutta missionary and Dhammakaya.

Thai monks, particularly those from large temples like Dhammakaya—which regularly host rituals attended by thousands—are highly experienced in organizing and arranging ritual spaces. On the other hand, Dhammayutta missionaries, especially from forest monasteries, may not be as skilled in this aspect. However, they typically invite young monks from Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University to assist with the design and decoration, supported by volunteers from Walubi. Usually, the main ritual stages at Mendut and Borobudur are managed by Dhammayutta missionaries, with Bhikkhu Kamsai, the Vice President of the Thai missionary group, coordinating the efforts. As a result, decorations often reflect the Mekong-Thai style, featuring floral arrangements, banana-leaf nagas, and an Emerald Buddha statue placed on the central altar.

Meanwhile, Dhammakaya held a meditation session and lantern release. This event was held at Lapangan Marga Utama from 19.00-22.30. In general, one lantern is priced at 600,000 rupiah or 37 USD, which can be shared with family members (Prihatini, 2024). It is claimed that around 1,000 lanterns are sold out in 2024, which means around 4,000 people attend this activity. Most importantly, before the lanterns are released, participants, regardless of religion, are asked to sit separately (to avoid distractions) and practice meditation for ten minutes. This meditation technique is based on the Dhammakaya method, which has been modernized into a science of psychological development and no longer a religious practice, thus, everyone can enjoy it. This session represents being a real or authentic Buddhist (or spiritual) in the sense that while many Buddhists just go to the temple, give donations, and ask for good fortune, but Dhammakaya can successfully teach 4,000 people to meditate, one of the essences of Buddhism.

Waisak in Borobudur has mostly been managed by Thai monks. The ritual can be divided into six parts. (1) Opening ceremony in Mendut the day before Waisak, this evening ritual is led by Thai missionaries. (2) Marching from Mendut to Borobudur holding flowers

(to worship Buddha on the main stage) is also led by Thai monks, usually senior monks who have been invited to join the Waisak, but in 2023 and 2024 it was led by *Thudong* (wandering) monks. (3) The main ceremony on the Borobudur stage, there are keynote speakers and reports from important people from the government and international embassies. This event also places Thai missionaries in the center and leads the blessing and guides a short meditation. (4) Worship in each tent according to their own style. The big tents are always Majubuthi (led by Thai missionaries, usually Kamsai) and Tantrayana Kasogatan (most of followers

are from Central Java), these two tents are the largest which can accommodate a thousand participants each. In addition, several other small tents provide a place to rest, while its members can follow the ritual with other tents. (5) The lantern floating ritual, which is considered as one of the highlights of the event. This ceremony has been led by Dhammakaya monks from Thailand as mentioned earlier. And (6) Morning meditation to welcome the Waisak moment, in case that particular year the Waisak time falls right after midnight. This ritual is always led by Thai monks.



Figure 2 Circumambulation of Borobudur led by Thai monks

Source: Photo by author (2023)



Figure 3 Main ritual led by Thai monks. This photo was taken from the tent below where a monitor broadcasting the ceremony from the central stage

Source: Photo by author (2023)

The new phenomenon of *Thudong* monks from Thailand can legitimize Walubi and Thai missionaries. Candra Jayanti shows the purity of interfaith harmony created by local communities and Thai monks, whose journey to Indonesia helps promote interfaith dialogue among grassroots communities (Jayanti, 2024, p. 39). *Thudong* or wandering monks from Thailand have traveled to Indonesia for two times in 2023 and 2024 to celebrate Waisak in Borobudur. In fact, *Thudong* can be seen as a political tool if we look through the context of religious authenticity in Indonesia, where each group tries to claim that their organization is the best. Therefore, the *Thudong* project is a symbol of religious legitimacy in the sense that when Thai missionary priests are not good at teaching, due to limited language skills and so on, they can find their strength to attract Indonesian Buddhists by utilizing forest monks who, although not good at teaching, are very involved in meditation practices (Buaban, 2020), until they become very strong and are able to walk a thousand kilometers.

This is actually a nostalgia or ideal in Buddhist imagination, in which many Indonesians read stories about forest monks in Thailand, who have to live with tigers, elephants, snakes, and are able to climb mountains to find a place to meditate. Of course, many people, including Muslims, believe that these monks are enlightened people, whose minds have reached *Nirvana/Moksha*. This claim can be witnessed since many Indonesian Buddhists asked me about the sacred power of these *Thudong* monks, and some Muslims asked them to consecrate their kris or expel their illness, assuming that those monks are holy shamans (*dukun sakti*).

In addition, Waisak in Borobudur is organized by Walubi, an organization that has been criticized for a long time. However, the *Thudong* monk project helps legitimize Walubi by attracting people who want to participate and see Waisak attended by *Thudong* monks as something more valuable. For Thai missionaries, such a project not only promotes Thai Buddhism in a new land, which can be claimed as the true or original Theravada that has not abandoned meditation practice, while Indonesian monks involve in teaching and carrying out rituals, in so doing, it also legitimizes the highest status of Thai monks in Waisak at Borobudur. Meanwhile, in the eyes of the government, the *Thudong*

project should help improve interfaith harmony in Indonesia, as suggested by Jayanti (2024). This opens up opportunities for Muslims to greet and give some water to monks (Rizzo, 2024, p. 51). It can be said that the *Thudong* project is a tool for networking, legitimizing Walubi, and ultimately supporting the claim of authenticity of Thai monks. The meaning of *Thudong*, especially ‘walking in the city’ where many people see it, has changed from a way of practicing self-awareness to a social awareness that is more profitable than its spiritual purpose.

Indonesia Tipitaka Chanting of STI: Symbol of Scripture-based Religion

Sangha Theravada Indonesia (STI), after attending the Tipitaka Recitation in Bodhgaya (India) which is also held annually, was inspired to hold this ritual in Indonesia as well. With the efforts of STI, this event started in 2015 and was attended by around 1,000 people to celebrate the Asalha Puja (another Buddhist holiday in July). The activity lasted for three days and the community was encouraged to take the eight precepts (*atthasila*) (Asalhpuja, 2024). In 2024, when I also attended the ritual, with the Salatiga Theravada group on July 14, it was claimed that the ritual was attended by more than 6,000 people. Indonesia Tipitaka Chanting (ITC) is a project to commemorate the Buddha’s first sermon called ‘Moving the Wheel of Dhamma’ (*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*). The importance of this day, as stated by Bhikkhu Sri Subhapanno, Chairman of STI, is to remind Buddhists of what the Buddha has taught. The ten chapters (*suttas*) of teachings are drawn from the Pali Tipitaka, part of the Middle Length Discourses (*Majjhima Nikaya*), published as a 271-page guidebook, which will be read with Indonesian translation for three days, July 12-14, 2024 (Medkom STI, 2024).

To imitate Waisak, ITC was also held in Borobudur by inviting many important figures from the government and also ambassadors. In addition to the regional heads, one of the main guests was the Director General of Buddhism, Supriyadi, and the Chairman of Permabudhi, Philip Widjaja. Theravada monks from Sri Lanka, India, Australia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia were also invited. In particular, the Thai monks who participated in this ritual were personal

invitations from STI, not official guests such as Thai missionary monks or representatives of Dhammyutta (STI lineage in Bangkok). Nevertheless, the arrival of

international monks and the large number of participants made this event seem international and as important as Waisak.



Figure 4 Main area of Indonesia Tipitaka Chanting

Source: Photo by author (2024)



Figure 5 Car parade decoration containing Tipitaka books

Source: Photo by author (2024)

Every step of the ITC event is a representation of authentic Buddhist teachings. On July 14, 2024, it began with a procession from Mendut to Borobudur at around 01.00 pm. However, this is not a worldly parade. Bhikkhu Sri Pannavaro emphasized that this is a meditation walk with full awareness to worship the Buddha and his teachings. Moreover, when Waisak was led by Thai missionaries, the parade had a music group playing Buddhist songs like Hari Waisak. The STI

procession was carried out by chanting Tisarana Gatha (*Itipiso Bhagava*) to remind participants of the Buddha, his teachings, and his noble followers along three kilometers. While waiting in the Mendut area, the participants, most of whom came from Central Java, were advised not to smoke and not to wear hats, to respect the Buddha's place.

The claim of authenticity of Theravada Buddhism and STI as a group that seeks to restore peace and

morality in the world can be found in a one-hour sermon delivered by Sri Pannavaro. He talked about three types of illnesses (that make a person suffer), namely physical, mental, and spiritual (moral). Many people, he explained, think that they are healthy, including mentally, but in fact they are not. There are those who still want to hurt others and there are those who commit corruption with complicated strategies. They are not mentally ill, but spiritually ill. Therefore, teachings of religions, Buddhism in particular, is very important, which can free humans from all kinds of illnesses or suffering.

This sermon implies that Buddhists must pay attention to the teachings, especially from the Tipitaka scriptures. The Reading of the Tipitaka at Alsalha Puja, in terms of function, is as important as Waisak, if the Buddha only understood the truth (Dharma) but did not teach, then there would be no Buddhism today. Therefore, focusing on this teaching is the same or better than just celebrating (by performing rituals such as Waisak). The emphasis on teachings or scriptures is also one of the new trends of Buddhist modernism, which tries to differentiate itself from traditional practices. In the Indonesian context, the Quran Reading Competition (*Lomba baca Quran*) is quite popular among Muslims. It is not only a method to preserve religion in a way of oral tradition, but also to claim that Islam or Buddhism is a religion of scripture, which has a lot of evidence to be rechecked, not just believing in teachers.

Magapuja of Buddhayana: Promoting religious diversity

When Thai missionaries claimed authenticity as true monks through meditation practice and *Thudong* monks symbolized the results of hard self-training, STI chose to claim authenticity through the preservation of Tipitaka, the original teachings of Theravada, Buddhayana, in this session, chose to promote diversity and traditional culture, which has been their strength for decades. It can be said that Thai monks have succeeded in expressing their identity through Waisak since 2010, and STI initiated Tipitaka Chanting since 2015, Buddhayana has just found a way to access Borobudur since 2022 by organizing Uposatha Day and in 2023 starting Maghapuja Day.

This development of Buddhayana is partially from an effort of Bhikkhu Ditthisampanno, former leader of

the Sangha in Central Java (2018-2022). When his term ended, he moved to live in Chatra Jinadhammo, a new temple located 700 meters from Borobudur. This temple is intended to be used by Buddhayana monks as a resting place or to welcome important guests who attend rituals at Borobudur. Being able to perform rituals at Borobudur not only provides a sense of nationalism in the sense that they are Indonesian Buddhists who should have the right to use Borobudur, but also to connect themselves with historical sites, asserting that their religion / organization is also important and suitable for this land. However, the relationship between Buddhayana and Thai monks is closer and stronger than that of STI monks. Chatra Jinadhammo has been used for *Thudong* monks' residence twice, in 2023 and 2024. One of the reasons is because Ditthisampanno himself was ordained and graduated with a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies from Thailand. Nonetheless, it can also be called a reciprocal relationship, since the popularity of Thudong monks can be used as a tool to promote Buddhayana temples like Vihara 2500 Buddha Jayanti Kassap in Semarang, which is currently in the process of revival.

Maghapuja usually falls in February. It is one of the four Buddhist holidays celebrated in Indonesia besides Waisak (May), Asalha (July), and Kathina (October), of course these days are from the Theravada tradition. Maghapuja is specifically intended to commemorate the event when 1,250 monks came to visit the Buddha, after they were sent to teach Buddhism. On that day, the Buddha again summarized the core teachings of Buddhism which include (1) avoiding all forms of evil, (2) doing good, and (3) purifying the mind, then he concluded that this is the teaching of all Buddhas. In order to live together with others and spread the religion, he gave a moral code by saying that 'those who hurt others will not be called Buddhist monks, so monks must refrain from hurting both physically and verbally' (Dhammasiha, 2023). Maghapuja in Indonesia has probably been celebrated since the 1950s, because Jinarakkhita was heavily influenced by Theravada countries such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar, but the rituals were performed in the temple area. I attended the first Maghapuja at Borobudur in March 4, 2023, which I assume was attended by around 1,000 people. The second Maghapuja in March

9, 2024 was reportedly attended by 4,000 participants (Budiyo, 2024).

Buddhayana does not use Mendut as a starting point to march to Borobudur as conducted by Waisak of Walubi and Asalha Maha Puja of STI, but starts from Chatra Jinadhammo. This may be a tool to promote their new temple. This place has been known since 2022 when Ditthisampanno initiated the Uposatha Day by inviting Buddhayana members, mostly from Central Java, to chant, meditate, and circumambulate Borobudur twice a month, according to the Theravada tradition. Both Uposatha and Maghapuja were attended by prominent people, one of whom was Supriyadi, the Director General of Buddhism. So, it can be said that these rituals made Buddhayana, as the host of the ceremony, access Borobudur again, in addition to Thai monks and STI.

For the 2024 event, the Director of Buddhist Affairs and Education, Nyoman Suryadarma, gave a keynote speech in support of Maghapuja by saying that in accordance with the Buddhist holidays, which are also recognized by the government, Magha Puja is one of them, so we should celebrate Magha Puja every year (Jinadhammo, 2024). Buddhayana represented an image of diversity with its monastic members coming from Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The cooperation of monks from different traditions joining in a ritual is a selling point of Buddhayana so far to show its flexibility

and openness. So, the ritual is performed in three traditions, each led by monks from that tradition. Of course, most Buddhayana laypeople could chant in Pali (Theravada), Mandarin (Mahayana), as well as Sanskrit (Vajrayana).

In 2024, a sermon was delivered by Bhikkhu Nyanasuryanadi, a senior monk from the Theravada tradition, Mahabodhi Buddhist Center, Semarang. He discussed the history of Buddhism in Indonesia and the importance of Borobudur, pointing out that Borobudur represents a diverse form of Buddhism, which is also mixed with local culture. Therefore, Borobudur should be a symbol of diverse identity, which promotes various ways of developing spirituality for people from various backgrounds (Jinadhammo, 2024). What he meant is corresponding to Buddhayana's idea in terms of non-sectarianism, in which Buddhists should not attach to a ritual or identity, but study the core teachings and find practices that are appropriate for them. The bathing ritual held every *Jumat Kliwon* (a significant day in the Javanese calendar) at Vihara Sakyawanaram in Bogor illustrates how the Buddhayana movement incorporates Javanese beliefs into Buddhist practices (Buaban, 2025). Consequently, among Buddhist organizations in Indonesia, Buddhayana is often seen as one of the most adaptable, emphasizing local traditions and promoting a non-sectarian approach (Rapiadi et al., 2023, p. 56; Syukur, 2022, p. 5).



Figure 6 Ritual began with monks chanting on top floor of Borobudur

Source: Photo by author (2023)



Figure 7 Session of sermon listening

Source: Photo by author, 2023

When discussing religious pluralism, academics tend to pay more attention to inter-religious relations. It should be noted that diversity and conflict within religion or intra-religious conflict are often found. According to Alexander Juan (2015, p. 767), there are two causes of intra-religious conflict, namely (1) dogmatic and (2) material. The first is religious belief that leads to violence because it links cognitive definitions of ultimate truth and has a sense of belonging (us and them). While the second refers to the struggle to find followers and donations. In general, religious elites can seek support from political allies and legitimize their violent campaigns against members of other religious organizations (Juan, 2015, p. 763 and Boicu, 2019, p. 95). This paper proposes that these two factors, for the case of Indonesian Buddhists, cannot be separated. The dogmatic or scriptural debate seems not to be a central issue, compared to the identity or ways of practice in daily life. Interestingly, to initiate one's own organization provides them freedom to design their activities to attract the members, which is beneficial in competition and serve the diverse needs.

Borobudur, the national historical site, is used by those three groups to affirm their authenticity, in which each have different reasons to claim that they are worthy of hosting the ritual and the protectors of authentic Buddhism. Thai missionaries represent the Thudong monks who are good at meditation practice. Meanwhile, STI portrays their Buddhism as a scripture-based

religion. On the contrary, when theory (*Pariyatti*) and practice (*Patipatti*) have been claimed by both, Buddhayana promotes diversity and flexibility which are also based on the motto of Indonesia, unity in diversity, and correspond to modern Buddhists who must not attach to any single belief, but use Buddhism as a tool (raft) with skillful means (*Upaya Kaushalya*). Indeed, the conflicts between the three groups have a positive effect in the sense that Buddhism has become more diverse because of competition, which can serve the needs of different people from different backgrounds Kitiarsa (2010, p. 564).

In terms of religious authenticity, one of the forms of Buddhist modernism that can cause some intra-religious conflict is an understanding that their doctrines and religious texts are more authentic than others. For those people, learning such authentic scriptures is more beneficial than ritual performances like relic veneration and everyday chanting (Quli, 2009, pp. 11-12). The case studies of Indonesia assert that being authentic Buddhism or modern Buddhism is not only to promote religious scripture as conducted by STI only, but authenticity can also be expressed through the claim of meditation practitioners of Thai monks and being open-minded Buddhists who promote local traditions of Buddhayana.

Meditation as highlighted by the Thai missionaries is not the same as modern meditation which carries the meaning of a psychological method to reduce stress as

emphasized by Martin Baumann (2012), on the contrary, the *Thudong* project is presented as evidence of the sacred power of monks who diligently practice meditation in the forest, and then have great energy to walk thousands of kilometers. Likewise, Buddhayana monks who are always criticized as being too flexible and carrying out cross-traditional practices, do not hesitate to express their support for local traditions or folk rituals, even though these are considered superstition in the eyes of modern Buddhists (Quli, 2009, p. 12). Therefore, the case studies of Thai monks and Buddhayana reveal that modern and authentic claims are not necessary to deny mysticism, supernatural powers, and folk beliefs. Furthermore, these factors can be used as their strengths to attract followers and express their identities in public spaces such as Borobudur.

Compared to modern Buddhist movements in other countries, the emphasis on *Thudong*—monks walking in public view—appears to draw inspiration from figures like Cambodian monastic leader Mahaghosananda, who initiated the first *Dhammayietra* in 1992, using the image of walking monks as a symbol of peace and opposition to violence. Similarly, the *Thudong* around Samui Island in Southern Thailand, led by Pramuan Pengchan, a spiritual seeker, in 2018, aimed to foster moral awareness and promote environmental consciousness (Chhun, 2019). While this paper argues that *Thudong* in Indonesia serves to legitimize the presence and status of Thai missionaries, it is also clear—as noted by Jayanti (2024)—that such practices contribute to the promotion of inter-religious harmony.

Regarding the Indonesian Tipitaka Chanting, to emphasize on scripture-based learning is can be found in many countries as well. For example, the Singaporean Buddhists after the 1950s, Mahayana Buddhists tend to reform their funeral by reducing paper-burning and traditional chanting to be based on prayers depicted from Buddhist scriptures on the grounds that the real teaching will help to liberate the dead and living people from suffering, according to the Buddhist tenet (Chia, 2024). In addition, the belief that monks should be strict in their monastic behaviors, as always claimed by the Indonesian Theravada group, is also the product of modern interpretation that Buddhist practice must differ from traditional rituals and behaviors, which is widely

held by Thai and Cambodian Dhammayutta monks (Hansen, 2007).

The promotion of local cultures as conducted by the Buddhayana, though in everyday practice it can be found elsewhere especially in Asian countries, since religions must always be adapted to serve the local beliefs like ancestral worship and donation for good fortune. Nonetheless, Buddhayana is not hesitate to accept that those things are not alien and should be supported to serve the diverse needs. To view rituals as tools to develop human's spirituality even though it is not a core idea of religion, is not new, but to employ the local cultures as an identity to show its openness and flexibility is clearly conducted by Buddhayana.

Conclusion

Although Buddhism in Indonesia is a minority, this religion is very diverse and each group has some freedom to design their own activities to attract members. Therefore, they always compete. And one of the methods used by them is to claim their organization is more authentic than others. Meanwhile, scholars such as Syukur (2022), Juangari (2022), Chia (2018), and Kimura (2003) stated that disagreement with the interpretation of *Adi-Buddha* caused conflict among Indonesian Buddhists, this paper shows that theological debate is not the main cause of the organizational split. On the contrary, disagreement with the ways practice in daily life such as chanting, wearing robes, vegetarianism, and so on, is the main concern of the followers, in practice. Therefore, this paper argues that the cause of the monastic schism is not the interpretation of God, but disagreement with the practice of teacher, Jinarakkhita.

Using case studies of three major groups such as Thai missionaries, STI, and Buddhayana, it is revealed that each group has its own way of claiming authenticity. Thai monks became promoters of meditation (*patipatti*), while the STI emphasized the Pali scriptures (*pariyatti*). Buddhayana chose to represent its motto, non-sectarianism, which is in accordance with the Indonesian ideology, unity in diversity and opening spaces for local traditions. For these groups, success in expressing their identity can be reached when they can access Borobudur, an Indonesian historical site, and make their rituals visible to the public.

In discussing with definitions of modern Buddhism studied by Natalie Quli (2009), this paper shows that only STI claims its authenticity by emphasizing the Pali scriptures. In contrast, Thai missionaries do not hesitate to describe meditation as a sacred power, possessed by forest monks, difficult to practice in everyday life, which is not in line with modern psychosocial interpretations. In addition, Buddhayana tends not to reject folk traditions and beliefs. More importantly, Buddhayana claims its authenticity by being able to adapt to local contexts and use folk practices as a method to support spiritual development.

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