

Holy Men of Another Kind: A Comparative Study of Millennialism in Northern Thailand and the Lower Mekong Region

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Abstract—Of studies of Buddhist millennialism in mainland Southeast Asia, those concerned with the millennial “holy men” rebellions of northeastern Thailand and southern Laos have attracted most attention. The literature on millennialism in northern Thailand is meagre by comparison and has been largely restricted to the work of three prominent anthropologists—Charles Keyes, Stanley Tambiah and Katherine Bowie—and focused on the famous *ton bun* (holy man) of this region, Khruba Siwichai. My argument in this article is that a common Buddhist cosmological imaginary and similar holy man terminology have encouraged these scholars to conflate the millennial movements of the two regions in a way that obscures fundamental differences in millennial thinking and the absence in the north of millennial rebellions that were common in the lower Mekong region.

Introduction

Millennialism and millennial movements have attracted much attention from anthropologists and historians since the seminal studies of Peter Worsley (1957), Norman Cohn (1961), Sylvia Thrupp (1962) and Yonina Talmon (1966). Kitsiri Malagoda (1970), Jan Nattier (1988) and Steven Collins (1998) have explored the key features of Buddhist millennialism centred on the mythology of the future Buddha (Pali: *Metteyya*; Sanskrit: *Maitreya*).

Publications on Buddhist millennialism in the lower Mekong region (northeastern Thailand and southern Laos) are voluminous, numbering more than forty to date.¹ Studies of Buddhist millennialism in northern Thailand have been confined largely to a small number of publications by the anthropologists, Charles Keyes, Stanley Tambiah and Katherine Bowie, focused on the renowned *ton bun* (“person of merit”) of this region, Khruba² Siwichai (1878–1938).

Keyes’ early study (1971) locates Khruba Siwichai in the context of the “integration of Northern Thai (Yuan) Buddhism” into a “national church” (*sangha*) but he does not

¹ Bernard Gay (2002) claims there were forty publications on this region by the beginning of this century (2002: 284).

² The word *khruba* (Northern Thai: *khuba*) is commonly translated as “venerated teacher”.

here link Siwichai in any way to millennialism. In his later study of millennialism in Thai society (1977), he limits his analysis of millennialism and millennial uprisings to northeastern Thailand and southern Laos. In his 1981 article, he identifies Khruba Siwichai as a “savior saint” (*nak bun*) and with the bodhisattva ideal of Theravada Buddhism but does not explicitly connect him to millennialism. In his more recent monograph on northeastern Thailand (Isan),³ he underscores Khruba Siwichai’s resistance to the Bangkok-centred *sangha* hierarchy and his pivotal role in northern Thai ethnoregionalism, but adds: “By far the most significant millennial uprising in Thailand, however, to my knowledge, is one that began in the northeastern region of the country about 1899–1900 . . .” (2014: 37), with the implication that Siwichai’s “resistance” was also of a millennial nature. Despite these allusions to Khruba Siwichai’s messianic qualities and millennialism, Keyes avoids any comparison with the rebel holy men (*phu mi bun*) of the lower Mekong region.

Tambiah devotes a whole chapter to millennial movements in Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand, including Burmese messianic associations (*gaing*), the Saya San rebellion in Burma, the Karen Telakhon sect, the “millennial uprisings” of northeastern Thailand and the ethnoregional movement in northern Thailand focused on Khruba Siwichai. Tambiah asks the question: “In what sense can he be included in the general framework of millennial Buddhism?” (1984: 302). His answer is that Siwichai was not only attributed the virtues and powers of a bodhisattva but also, within the Lanna Buddhist tradition,⁴ those of a holy man who attempted to recreate Lanna as a Buddhaland (*Buddhadesa*) by means of “monumental building projects” (1984: 304, 302). However, this description does not prompt him to compare Khruba Siwichai’s “millennialism” with the “militant and violent millennialism” of northeastern Thailand (1984: 310).

Bowie presents a more expansive analysis of millennialism focused on Khruba Siwichai. She argues that “existing scholarship has failed explicitly to consider the possibility of a linkage between Srivichai and millenarianism” and “Srivichai should be contextualized not merely as an apolitical saintly *tonbun* but as an incarnation of Maitreya embedded in a millenarian social movement” (2014b: 686). “Explicit evidence of messianism” is to be found in the charge by Siamese officials that Siwichai was in possession of the Srikanchai sword associated with the god Indra and symbolic of the victory of righteousness over oppression (Bowie 2014b: 684). The popular component of the millenarian movement in northern Thailand was the widespread “apocalyptic omens” and millenarian expectations of the coming of the future Buddha engendered by famine, social upheaval, epidemics and other disasters that devastated the northern populace in the decade of the 1910s (2014b: 696). Notably Bowie does not distinguish the northern “millenarian movement” and Khruba Siwichai as a “millenarian *tonbun*”

³ The term “Isan” was introduced in 1900 as an invention to conceal the non-Siamese (Lao) ethnic identity of most of the region (Iijima 2018: 171).

⁴ “Lanna” (A Million Rice Fields) refers to the principalities (*muang*) of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Lampang, Nan and Phrae, centred on the river valleys of northern Thailand. The Lanna Buddhist tradition (a regional variant of Theravada Buddhism with possible Mahayana influence) flourished under Chiang Mai rulers from the 14th to the 16th century and spread to neighbouring Tai-speaking peoples of Chiang Tung, Sipsong Panna and northern Laos.

from the millenarianism of neighbouring countries (Burma, Cambodia) nor from “the messianic revolts” of northeastern Thailand and Laos (2014b: 692–693).

This begs the question: given the assumed commonalities between the millenarianism of northern Thailand and the lower Mekong, why did Khruba Siwichai not instigate a revolt in the north, despite the widespread discontent and unrest arising from Siamese centralising policies? Indeed, these policies were linked to two rebellions in the north, the Phaya Phap rebellion in 1889 (Tanabe 1984) and the Shan rebellion of 1902 (Walker 2014), but these were not led by messianic holy men. The Phaya Phap rebellion was a response to the “excessive tax burden” (especially various new commodity taxes introduced by the Siamese commissioner) and “oppositional ideology” was expressed not through millennial beliefs but in the form of “indigenous supernaturalism”, such as bathing in sacred water to provide invulnerability against enemy attack (Tanabe 1984: 86, 96). The Shan rebellion against the “growing regulatory power of the Siamese state” was instigated in Phrae by a local bandit chief called Pakamong supported by local nobles⁵ (Walker 2014: 563; Sarassawadee 2005: 206), and lacked religious associations.

Implicit in the writings of some scholars is that a millennial-type rebellion was avoided because Siamese officials had learned from rebellions in the northeast that government military intervention exacerbated the situation, so Siwichai was handled with kid gloves to prevent him becoming a martyr. Thus, in 1920, he was “invited” to go to Bangkok to answer charges (Kwanchewan 2003: 278) and ecclesiastical authorities paid the expenses of his return journey to Lamphun (Bowie 2014b: 690). Even during his second detention in Bangkok in 1935 when “schism was in the air”, he was “treated carefully” (Tambiah 1984: 304). I argue that the absence of rebellion lies not in Siamese state policies but in the religious orientation of Siwichai and of his principal disciple and successor, Khruba Khao Pi, and that a shared cosmological imaginary and similar holy man terminology (*phu mi bun*, *cao ton bun*, *ton bun*, *nak bun*)⁶ obscure fundamental differences between the holy man traditions of these regions.

Richard Landes uses the term “millennial” to “designate the belief that at some point in the future our world will be radically transformed into a world of peace, justice, fellowship, and plenty” (2006: 7). Within this “capacious” definition, he distinguishes between “apocalyptic millennialism” and “nonapocalyptic millennialism” (2006: 13). Jan Nattier makes a similar distinction between “here/now” and “here/later” versions of the Maitreyan myth (Nattier 1988: 25).⁷

One needs to locate the holy men of northern Thailand within the context of the Lanna literary tradition, the focus on moral renewal and revivalism, the role of holy men as agents and exemplars of this renewal and, in particular, the role of religious construction in the creation of sacred space, moral communities and proto utopias. This contrasts with the magical and apocalyptic millenarianism of the holy men rebellions of

⁵ Sarassawadee Ongsakul distinguishes between nobles by birth (*chao*) and “nobility by position” (e.g. *phaya/phraya*) (2005: 215).

⁶ The terms *phu mi bun* and *chao ton bun* were both used in millennial narratives in northeastern Thailand and in northern Thailand (Keyes 2014: 42; Lagarde 2012: 7).

⁷ Nattier equates “here/now” Maitreyan myths with “active apocalypticism”, a version that is not found in any Maitreyan canonical text (1988: 26).

northeastern Thailand and southern Laos, which had a marked political orientation and in which the Maitreyan myth was transformed into an “ideology of rebellion” shared by rebel holy men and their followers and similar to some Chinese apocalyptic millennial movements (Nattier 1988: 32). Patrice Ladwig characterises the holy man rebels of the lower Mekong as “peripheral figures” and outsiders to the local *sangha*, Mahanikai or Thammayut sects (2014: 308). I argue that this status gave them the freedom to reinterpret traditional prophetic narratives in a way that aligned with their urgent political goals.

Holy men rebellions of the lower Mekong region

There have been numerous holy men movements in parts of the lower Mekong region. For the sake of comparison with northern Thailand I will focus on those rebellions between 1899 and 1936: the turn-of-the century rebellions culminating in 1901–1902, the Nong Makkaeo rebellion of 1924 and the Molam Noi Chada rebellion of 1936—a period which is roughly coterminous with the monastic career of Khruba Siwichai in the north.

The millennial movements of northeastern Thailand and southern Laos fit Nattier’s definition of “here/now” versions of the Maitreyan myth (1988: 30–32) and Landes’ categorisation of millennial movements that have “active apocalyptic scenarios” (Landes 2006: 8). In these Buddhist millennial movements the appearance of the future Buddha is predicted as imminent, either by the ascent of the believer to the abode of the Maitreya in the Tusita heaven or the descent of the Maitreya to earth (Nattier 1988: 29) and even possession of the holy man.

In the three apocalyptic millennial movements the Buddhist dimension is reflected in beliefs centred on the imminent advent of the future Buddha (Phra Sri Ariya Mettrai) preceded by a precursor messianic figure of the holy man (*phu mi bun*, *cao ton bun*). Holy men were also identified as Buddhist “righteous rulers” (Phraya Thammikarat) or “special persons” (*phu wiset*) acclaimed for their supernatural powers (Keyes 1977: 296). In the Nong Makkaeo rebellion rituals were performed to beseech Phra Sri Ariya to descend to earth and possess the holy men (Chatthip and Pranut 1980: 6). Molam Noi Chada predicted the imminent arrival of Phra Sri Ariya and the initiation of a new religion of Phra Sri Ariya within two or three years (Chatthip 1984: 120). In the 1901–1902 rebellions some holy men even claimed to be Phra Sri Ariya (Chatthip 1984: 117). In May 1901 a prominent rebel, Ong Keo, “announced that the 5,000 years marking the end of Buddhism had already elapsed and that a holy man had become manifest” (Gay 2002: 285).

In the case of the 1901–1902 rebellions the predicted advent of Phra Sri Ariya was to be preceded by catastrophic events; for example, powerful winds for seven days and seven nights during which certain vegetables and animals would become man-eating ogres (*yaksa*). Avoidance of these catastrophes required, among other things, the performance of certain purificatory rituals (such of *tat kam wang wen* by monks to counter bad karma) and even the consummation of marriage by maidens and spinsters (Keyes 1977: 296). Molam Noi Chada also predicted “near future catastrophes would occur, including fires and earthquakes, and that people who did not hold to righteousness

would die” (Chatthip 1984: 120). Regarding the Nong Makkaeo revolt Chatthip Nartsupha does not report predictions of a catastrophe preceding the advent of the Phra Sri Ariya. Catastrophes or not all three millennial movements predicted a radical and imminent transformation of the world—a world of prosperity and abundance, a world free of state exactions and state rule, Siamese and French (Baird 2013: 265), and the fulfillment of Lao irredentist hopes for the revival of and return to Vientiane (Chatthip 1984: 120).

A notable feature of some of the revolts was the seemingly odd combination of exhortations of Buddhist moral precepts and rituals, on the one hand, and sexual license, on the other. With reference to marriage consummation mentioned above Keyes observes: “Even a sexual element is added in that all maidens and women who have not yet consummated marriage should ‘take husbands’ (the Thai phrase suggest having intercourse as well as entering into marriage)” (2014: 43). In the case of the Nong Makkaeo revolt if the three holy men (and former monks) became fond of any village girls the girls would have to meditate with the holy men inside the houses. “Through this ritual many young and pretty girls had to sleep with the holy men with the consent of their parents and husbands” (Chatthip and Pranut 1980: 5). Such rituals have a Tantric quality and exemplify Landes’ characterisation of apocalyptic millennialism: “The apocalyptic moment induces extreme behaviour of wildly opposing types, from radical asceticism . . . to extravagant antinomianism (murder, sexual license, taboo breaking” (2006: 17).

The political economy of millennialism in the lower Mekong region and northern Thailand

Keyes has argued that the fundamental cause of the millennial activities in northeastern Thailand in 1901 and 1902 was “a sudden and radical shift in conceptions of power” (1977: 285). Before the end of the 19th century the region comprised principalities (*muang*) ruled by Lao nobles, “who were feudal-like dependents of the Siamese throne” (1977: 292). Radical change began in 1867 when France forced the Siamese court to surrender tributary authority over the Kingdom of Cambodia, leading King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) to strengthen Siam’s control over the peripheral areas of Siam and to introduce a new centralised system of administration. In the northeast, the threat came from France; in the north, it was from Britain in response to political turmoil in Chiang Mai’s border principalities, threatening the lives of British subjects and creating confusion over teak concessions that jeopardised the economic interests of British logging companies (Sarassawadee 2005: 169-72). In 1882, Siamese high commissioners, usually high-ranking nobles of royal lineage, were appointed to northeastern Thailand to act as intermediaries between the Siamese court and the local elite. Two years later, King Rama V’s brother, Prince Pichitprichakon, was appointed special commissioner to the north for the same purpose (Sarassawadee 2005: 185). Between 1894 and 1906, a territorially based *thesaphiban* system was introduced throughout Siam (in the northeast in 1894 and in the north in 1899). Various regions (*monthon*) were divided into provinces, districts, sub-districts and villages, replacing

patrimonial polities based on personal allegiance. The consequence was a significant diminution in the power of nobles replaced by a civil service system in which Siamese officials—from high commissioner to district head—held sway. In both regions, local nobles also suffered loss of income from diminished taxing rights (Keyes 1977: 293; Sarassawadee 2005: 204), leading increasing pressure on them to appropriate peasant resources (money or rice land) to recoup losses (Murdoch 1974: 54).

In the northeast and the north, peasants were also burdened by the introduction in 1901–1902 throughout the country of the four baht head tax to replace the traditional labour *corvée*; but many continued to be conscripted to build roads, bridges and irrigation canals despite having paid the annual tax. “The hardship caused resentment towards the new Bangkok officials, who didn’t hesitate to conscript labor” (Sarassawadee 2001: 205). The burden of the head tax was exacerbated in the northeast by the dire economic situation, with poor harvests in 1901 leading to starvation in some rural areas (Baird 2013: 267). In northern Thailand, the plight of the peasantry worsened in the 1910s, with famines in the northern provinces of Phrae, Lampang, Lamphun and Chiang Mai, forcing many to migrate to Chiang Rai. Epidemics of malaria, smallpox and influenza took a heavy toll on life. Also, the Military Conscription Act of 1905, which came into effect in 1914, “sparked major resentment” due the drain on scarce labour resources for farming (Bowie 2014a: 704).

The 1901–1902 rebellions were not confined to northeastern Thailand. In an early seminal article, John Murdoch noted that previous studies tended to see the rebellion “in discrete national terms, ending in either bank of the Mekong River” (1974: 48) and that this scholarship had “not adequately considered the rebellion’s character as transcending present national boundaries, having common leadership and growing out of common regional causes” (1974: 47). In fact, the spark of the rebellion was ignited by Mon-Khmer-speaking Kha ethnic groups, mainly the Alak, Nha-heun, and Loven of the Boloven Plateau-Attopeu Region and the Sedang of the Kontum Plateau (Murdoch 1974: 55). Also, the first uprising was instigated south of Saravane against the French in March 1901 by an Alak tribesman, Ong Keo (Bac My), who was joined by Loven chiefs, Ong Kommadam and Kommaseng, from the Boloven Plateau. Murdoch notes that “through May, 1901, the incitement to violence among the followers of the *Phu Mi Bun* was confined to Kha tribesmen in Southern Laos and the Kontum Plateau of Vietnam” (Murdoch 1974: 56).⁸ The first uprising on the west side of the Mekong River did not occur until March 1902 and involved an attack on Khemmarat led by an ethnic Lao, Ong Man, from Savannakhet.

On the east side of the Mekong, the rebellion was ignited by “increasingly stringent reforms” introduced by the French. These included the tripling of head taxes from what they had been under the Siamese combined with *corvée* impositions. Furthermore, the French moved to clamp down on the slave trade. For many years, Siamese, Lao and Khmer had made slave raids in southern Laos on Mon-Khmer-speaking “tribal” peoples and some of the stronger tribes, such the Sedang, also profited from the trade by preying

⁸ See Baird 2013: 259, 266–267; Gay 2002: 287 on the Pho Khaduat “revolt” in 1900. Pho Kaduat was from “a Mon-Khmer language-speaking group” (Baird 2013: 259, Note 5).

on weaker tribes and even lowland Vietnamese further east (Murdoch 1974: 51). From the mid-1890s to 1900, there was a resurgence of the traditional slave trade, prompting French authorities to deploy militiamen to suppress the trade. Murdoch concludes: “The result of the French reforms was a general discontent on the part of the Lao and Kha populace” (1974: 54).

One source of discontent, that distinguished the lower Mekong region from northern Thailand, was the irredentism of the Lao populace of the lower Mekong. One rebel leader claimed that all leaders on both sides of the Mekong River had a common objective “to establish a kingdom which was not under either Siamese or the French” (Keyes 1977: 298). The corollary was a strong identification among the Lao with the former kingdom of Vientiane. Thus, Ong Luang, a partner of Ong Keo, had been imprisoned in 1895 for claiming to be a holy man and later also claimed descent from the Kings of Vientiane (Murdoch 1974: 56). However, such irredentist yearnings were more pronounced among the Lao of northeastern Thailand following the Siamese victory over the ruler of Vientiane, Chao Anouvong, in 1827–28, the sacking of Vientiane and the forced resettlement of thousands of Lao into northeastern Thailand. Chatthip and Pranut claim that “every revolt in the Northeast has always been the liberation of Vientiane” (1980: 13). At the holy men’s meetings at Nong Makkaeo, rhythmic verses cited “reminded the peasants of their Laotian origin and of the destruction of Vientiane by the Thai army in 1828 . . .” Also, each of the seven holy men of Nong Makkaeo had the name of a hero in the *History of Vientiane*, a story of the descendants of the Anouvong dynasty which sought independence of Vientiane from Thai rule (Chatthip and Pranut 1980: 7). The holy man Molam Noi Chada predicted that following the imminent arrival of the future Buddha, the head tax would be reduced to two baht and “Vientiane would be re-established once again” (Chatthip 1984: 120).

Rebel leaders, active apocalypticism and Maitreyan “ideology of rebellion”

Nattier notes that Chinese sources recorded some “here/now” versions of the Maitreya myth and that in China the myth was sporadically transformed into an “ideology of rebellion”, not because Chinese Buddhists were more prone to revolution or more oppressed, but because “the ideological background was conducive to such a change” (1988: 32). That is, “The would-be rebels must believe that their enterprise is divinely sanctioned, and this may (but need not) include the notion that a messianic figure has already appeared, or is about to appear, to act as leader” (1988: 42, Note 41).

Nattier’s concept of “ideology of rebellion” is germane to the active apocalypticism of holy men rebels of the lower Mekong region, their background and their political and religious orientation. Keyes states that monks or ex-monks are likely candidates to be *phu wiset*, who become *phu mi bun*, but notes that of the nine major leaders of the main 1902 rebellion in northeastern Thailand, beginning in March, only one was a monk; one was a local noble and the others were villagers (1977: 290, 299). In the 1901 rebellion in southern Laos, the key leader, Ong Keo (Bac My), although from a non-Buddhist ethnic minority, studied Buddhism as a monk in Laos and Bangkok and

was even literate in Pali (Baird 2013: 259). Ong Keo's "lieutenant", Ong Kommadam, was not a monk or ex-monk; Pho Kaduat, another prominent rebel, studied only magic (*visa akhom*) (Baird 2013: 266). In the Nong Makkaeo rebellion of 1924, the three initial rebel leaders were all monks, but later disrobed. The other four leaders were apparently local nobles (Chatthip and Pranut 1980: 8). The leader of the Molam Noi Chada "revolt" was an itinerant folk musician, though he claimed to be the reincarnation of Phra Chada, a monk who played a role in the 1901–1902 rebellions (Chatthip 1984: 120).

With reference to the millennial movements of the lower Mekong at the turn of the century, Ladwig underscores "the tension between institutionalised state Buddhism and peripheral figures such as lay ascetics, holy men or forest monks . . ." (2014: 308) and that "The case of Ong Keo and those of numerous other leaders of similar movements shows that it was rarely monks from state-organized *sangha* who evolved as leaders of millennial rebellions" (2014: 318). Ladwig notes Justin McDaniel's assertion that "these holy men were not teachers or students in monasteries" (2008: 63). Ladwig responds with the question of "where to draw the line between organized state Buddhism and its 'outside' is disputable" but concludes that "McDaniel is generally right to locate these figures outside the *sangha*, at least for the case of Laos" (2014: 318, Note 49). Furthermore, it is my view that the pretentious, hubristic and grandiose claims of these rebel leaders to an array of supernatural and magical powers and messianic assertions of incarnation as heroic royal figures, celestial beings and even the Maitreya Buddha, combined with at times licentious behaviour, would have made them vulnerable to expulsion from the *sangha* on the grounds of committing one or more of the *parajika* offences.⁹

I would also argue that it was the outsider status of these rebel holy men, whether lay *phu wiset* or renegade monks, that gave them the freedom to flexibly reinterpret the Maitreyan myth in a way that predicted an imminent apocalypse and imminent advent of the future Buddha and in a way that aligned this reconfigured ideology with the urgency of their political goals. According to Landes: "Apocalyptic millennialists live in a world overflowing with meaning" (2006: 15). Crucial to this semiotic arousal were, I suggest, the palm-leaf manuscripts (*lai thaeng*) which were disseminated first throughout southern Laos and then northeastern Thailand in 1901 and 1902 (Ishii 1975: 121; Keyes 1977: 295), combined with itinerant troubadour singers (*mo lam*), who announced the coming of the *phu mi bun* (Keyes 1977: 295).¹⁰ Apparently, the handwritten manuscripts were reformulated versions of conventional Lao prophetic narratives,¹¹ with different versions influenced by locality. For example, Phraya Thammikarat (Lord Righteous

⁹ The four *parajika* offences of the Buddhist Vinaya code are: 1. sexual intercourse; 2. serious theft; 3. murder; and 4. falsely claiming to have obtained supernatural powers.

¹⁰ Baird suggests that the Champassak Royal House of southern Laos exploited the unsettled circumstances to incite rebellion and that, west of the Mekong River, the circulated palm-leaf manuscripts and *mo lam* singers were organised as part of a broad campaign by someone connected to Champassak, though "definitive evidence is lacking" (2013: 274). Peter Koret reports (2007: 147) that some of this literature was connected to the "political objectives of the instigators" of the rebellions, but he does not specifically link such machinations to Champassak.

¹¹ Keyes (1977: 295) lists four documents: 1. *Nangsue Phraya In*; 2. *Nangsue Thao Phraya Thammikarat*; 3. *Nangsue Phu Mi Bun*; and 4. *Tamnan Phuenmuang Krung*.

Ruler) is identified in one manuscript as a villager from Ban Nalao in Roi Et province of northeastern Thailand (Keyes 1977: 296).

On the Lao side of the border, these manuscripts were distributed through many villages beginning in 1900 (Baird 2013: 271) and would have resonated with both Lao and Mon-Khmer-speaking minorities. These upland ethnic minorities in southern Laos and throughout the wider region have long been influenced by Buddhist cosmology, adapting it in a syncretistic way to autochthonous beliefs. Ladwig comments that Ong Keo, a former Buddhist monk, primarily drew on Buddhism, but also transcended “a more narrowly defined set of Buddhist practices”. Ong Keo held a festival that one colonial official described as composed of a “bizarre religious *mélange* of Buddhist cults and gross and bloody Alack rites” (2014: 316).

Holy men of another kind

Khruba Siwichai

Khruba Siwichai was born in 1878 in the village of Ban Pang, in Li district, Lamphun province. There he was ordained as a novice (*samanen*) at eighteen and as a monk at twenty-one. He was a diligent student of Pali and northern Thai texts and of meditation (Swearer 1988: 78). Subsequently, meditation in the distinctive Lanna tradition (*kammathan Lanna*) became central to Khruba Siwichai’s ascetic lifestyle. This reflects the forest-monk tradition (*aranyavasi*) of Wat Suan Dok and Wat Pa Daeng of Chiang Mai, dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries, but which by the 19th century had merged into a single forest-dwelling sect of the Sinhalese tradition (Veidlinger 2006: 150). Khruba Siwichai’s ascetic regimen also included owning only three pieces of clothing and eating only one vegetarian meal a day. He claimed that he lived according to the strict asceticism (*dhutanga*) of Maha Kassapa Thera (Keyes 1981: 156).¹²

I have already noted that most holy men of the lower Mekong region were not Buddhist monks or former monks and that those who were monks were “peripheral figures” (Ladwig) and “outside the *sangha*” (McDaniel). By contrast, Khruba Siwichai was a prominent monk in the northern *sangha*, that had, according to Bowie, “an organized structure.” She adds: “Although being critiqued as being lax and loosely structured, evidence suggests that the Lanna *sangha* was a well-functioning, hierarchically organized body, complete with a *sangharaja* (‘king of the *sangha*’) and senior council” (2017: 30). Within the northern *sangha*, Siwichai was not only a temple abbot (of Wat Ban Pang), but also the head of a clerical sub-district (*hua muat*) (Bowie 2014b: 688) and he had widespread support from monks throughout the north in his opposition to the Siamese state and religious authorities (Bowie 2017: 29). Bowie also argues that the northern *sangha* was significantly more independent of state control than the *sangha* of the central region, not in the form of rebelliousness against the rulers, but in the way it “served as a check on the northern courts” (Bowie 2017: 33).

¹² Maha Kassapa (Maha Kasyapa) was a senior disciple of Buddha and was elected the convenor of the First Council and codifier of the Dhamma after Buddha’s death (Tambiah 1984: 16–17).

A notable manifestation of the relative independence of the Lanna *sangha* was its resistance to the Sangha Act of 1902,¹³ which was also part of the progressive political and administrative incorporation of northern Thailand into the Bangkok-centred Siamese state (beginning in the 1880s). The Act aimed at the centralisation and hierarchisation of a national *sangha* and the standardisation of religious practices throughout the country, in accordance with the Thammayut sect.¹⁴ It established rules related to the movement of monks from one monastery to another (including identity cards to regulate this movement), annual register of monks, and the management of monastic funds (Tambiah 1976: 234). The overall effect of the Sangha Act was to assert increased state control over monks. Not only did the ranks and titles of the *sangha* hierarchy now parallel those of the civil administration, but also certificates of appointment of higher ecclesiastic authorities had to be counter-sealed by the secular provincial governor. Furthermore, royal approval was needed for the building of new monasteries and the repair of old ones (Tambiah 1976: 236-237).

Opposition by the northern *sangha* to the Thammayut-inspired Sangha Act of 1902 preceded Khruba Siwichai's recalcitrance. A prominent antagonist was Khruba Sopha (1832–1915), the abbot of Wat Fai Hin in Chiang Mai and appointed as *sangharaja* in 1895. The king in Bangkok invited all monasteries to convert to Thammayut, but Sopha and other northern monks refused. To Sopha, to convert to Thammayut was tantamount to submitting to the authority of Bangkok (Bowie 2017: 45). “Why become their slaves?” he exclaimed, reflecting his reputation “for not being afraid to stand up to secular authorities” (Bowie 2017: 46).

Khruba Siwichai was later also noted for “his opposition to obeying orders from secular authorities” (Bowie 2014a: 716,717). For example, he vigorously opposed the Military Conscription Act of 1905 (implemented in the north in 1914). The Act mandated that all novices and monks without ecclesiastic office (*somanasak*), or who had not passed ecclesiastic examinations (*parian*), were to be registered for military conscription. The northern *sangha* was outraged at this interference in religious affairs by central Thai officials and Siwichai “refused to prioritize the needs of the state over the sacred realm of the monastic order” (Bowie 2014a: 723).

Khruba Siwichai's obdurate resistance to secular authorities and to *sangha* “reforms” did not, however, lead to rebellion. In 1920, the ruler of Lamphun invited Siwichai to receive alms there. A band of 600 people arrived in the city. A newspaper reported: “The officials thought the priest had come to create a revolt . . .” (Bowie 2014a: 717). Another newspaper denounced him as a rebel and “a traitor to his religion and his king (Bowie 2014b: 684). A little more than a month later, the same newspaper reported the rumour (the basis of the eighth charge against Siwichai) that “a sword with a golden scabbard fell from the sky on the altar at Phra Sri Vijaya's wat, and that he retained possession of the sword” (Bowie 2014b: 684). This was an allusion to the Srikanchai

¹³ Keyes (1971: 556) claims that the Sangha Act of 1902 was not actually enforced in the north until 1910 and Bowie (2014b: 713) not until 1924.

¹⁴ The Thammayut (“Adhering to the Dhamma”) sect was established by Prince Mongkut when he was a monk (1824–51). Mongkut's reformism emphasised monastic discipline and was influenced by the strict asceticism of the Raman (Mon) sect of southern Burma.

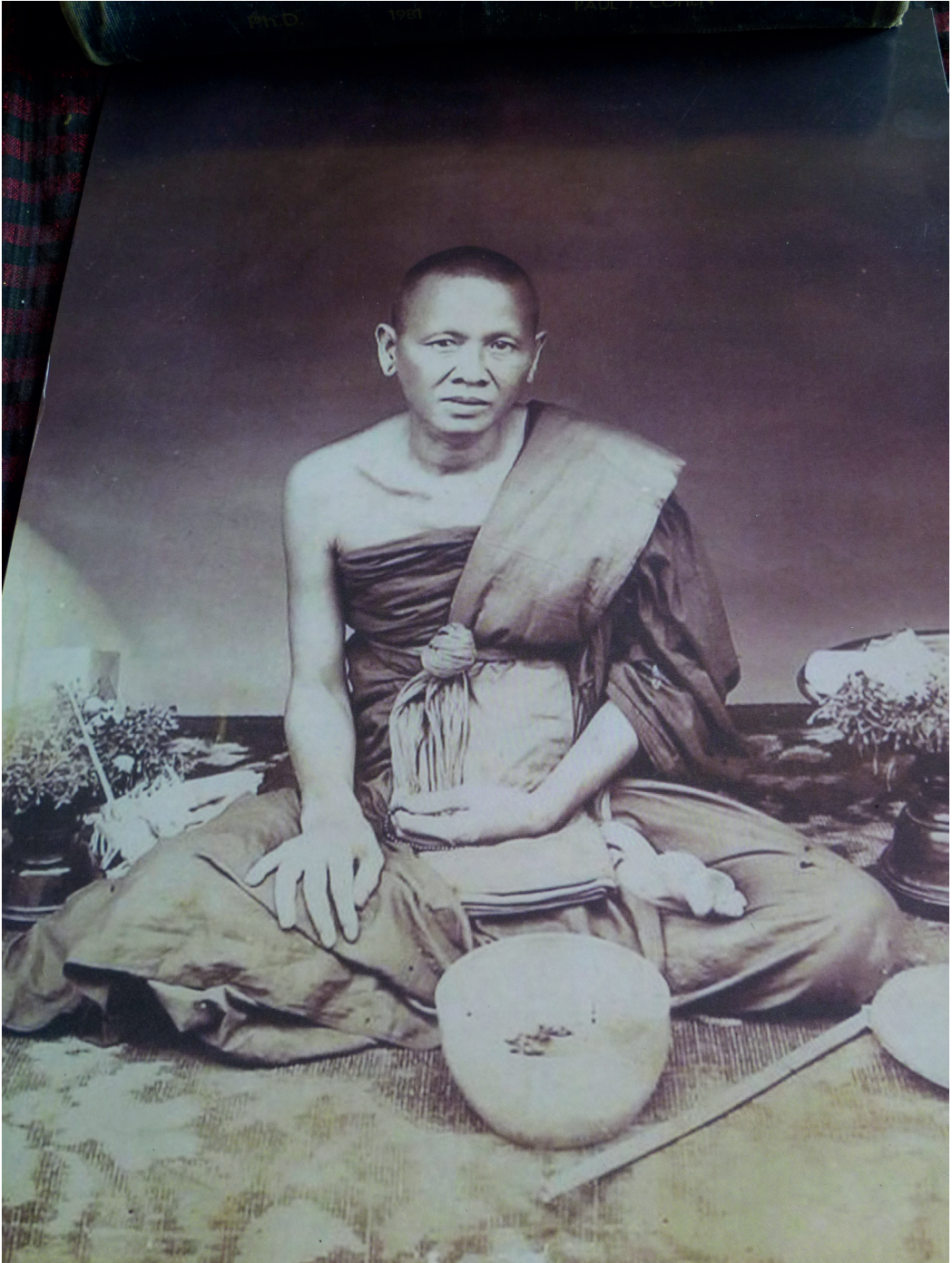


Figure 1. Khruba Siwichai at Wat Phrathat Chaw Hae, Phrae, in 1924. Reproduced from a photo at the Khruba Siwichai museum in Wat Ban Pang, Li district, Lamphun province (photo by author)

sword associated with the god Indra and a symbol of the victory of righteousness over oppression. According to Bowie: “To charge Srivichai with possession of Indra’s sword was, in effect, to accuse him of spearheading a millenarian revolt” (2014b: 684).

However, Siwichai responded that this was just a rumour spread by other people and, moreover, neither did he claim to be a *ton bun* (holy man). His denial was

accepted by the investigatory committee in Bangkok and he was found innocent of the charge (Bowie 2014b: 687). By the time of Siwichai's second trip to Bangkok in 1935, conflict had become intense. "The independent monks of the north had openly severed connections with their ecclesiastic superiors and declared Phra Srivijaya to be their leader" (Bowie 2014a: 713). Many monks and novices disrobed, some forcibly by police. A crisis was avoided when Siwichai signed an agreement "to abide by the laws of the church" (Bowie 2014a: 713).

What was Siwichai's motivation in signing this agreement rather than fanning the flames of rebellion? Was he avoiding a pending rebellion, given the intensity of the conflict at that time, and realistically anticipating a harsh military response by the Siamese state of the kind that had occurred in the earlier rebellions in the northeast? Was he influenced by the relatively lenient treatment he had received from Siamese authorities, especially by high-ranking monks of the Siamese *sangha*? Was he persuaded by what Keyes calls "a tacit agreement" on the Thai side "to permit the northern clergy to follow Yuan customs?" (1971: 558). Rather, I argue that Siwichai eschewed violent rebellion due to his religious orientation, including a non-apocalyptic millennialism revealed consistently in Lanna chronicles, that valued moral revival and creation of moral communities.

One genre of these numerous traditional chronicles is "Buddha chronicles" (*Phuttha tamnan*).¹⁵ Some are narratives of Buddha's legendary journey to northern Thailand and neighbouring regions. In these chronicles, the Buddha's physical presence in this Buddhist space is revealed in his relics, images and footprints, creating a primordial Buddhaland (Pali: *Buddhadesa*; Thai: *Phutthathesa*). Related to these narratives was Khruba Siwichai's prolific building of religious structures. Over a period of some thirty years he was responsible for the construction or renovation of more than 100 temples (*wat*), temple-halls (*wihan*) and pagodas (*chedi*). These extensive building activities contributed to his renown as a holy man (*ton bun*) and as a Buddha-to-be (bodhisattva), who had accumulated great merit in past lives and who, out of loving-kindness (*metta*) and generosity (*dana*), provided others the opportunity to make merit by assisting in the building process.¹⁶ Siwichai's religious constructions and renovations aimed to revive traditional practices of the northern *sangha* and the glories of Lanna Buddhism, as well as "restoring the land to its original foundations as a *Buddhadesa* (Buddhaland)" and for "the moral renewal of Northern Thai Buddhism" (Swearer 1988: 81).

There are also "messianic *tamnan*" (Lagiarde 2012: 6). I suggest that the recreation of a Buddhaland is not only a form of Buddhist revivalism,¹⁷ that restores a glorious and sacred past, but also serves as a precursor and prototype for the utopian age of the future

¹⁵ According to Swearer, "To my knowledge, the physical presence of the Buddha as represented by his reputed visit to the north plays a more omnipresent role here than in any other parts of the country" (1974: 73).

¹⁶ Kwanchewan comments that this collective construction also created "sacred space" and strong sense of unity and equality (*communitas*) between different ethnic groups (2003: 276).

¹⁷ In an earlier article, I used this term as a correction to Tambiah's narrow focus on "magical, cataclysmic and militant manifestations of millennialism" (Cohen 2001: 241). I argued that millennialism in the Lanna holy man tradition is a "language for expressing revivalist aspirations". I consider Buddhist revivalism to be consistent with non-apocalyptic millennialism.

Buddha, Ariya Metteyya. The Lanna “messianic” chronicles consistently followed Nattier’s “here/after” interpretation of the Maitreya myth, that is, Buddhaghosa’s “standard” timetable of decline of 5,000 years after Buddha’s enlightenment preceding the appearance of the future Buddha (Nattier 1991: 56; Lagarde 2012: 91; Nguyen 2014: 4, 5, 29, 50, 81).¹⁸ Nattier concludes: “According to the here/after version of the Maitreya myth, then, the only means of access to Maitreya’s Golden Age is to die and be reborn at the time of Maitreya’s appearance on earth, which this tradition . . . assigns to a distant future . . .” (1988: 27). A similar perspective is revealed in Kwanchewan Srisawat’s comment on Lanna Buddha chronicles, which emphasises gradual moral change and precludes a “here/now” interpretation and imminent advent of the future Buddha:

Since Phra Sri Ariya’s birth takes a long time, Phya Dhamma, a bodhisattva, will be born as a savior preceding him. He will teach the people to observe moral behavior to prepare the appropriate setting for the coming of Phra Sri Ariya, who will not be born if there are too many unworthy people in the world. (1988: 36).

The White Monk

Did Khruba Siwichai eschew rebellion against the Siamese state for purely strategic reasons or for deep-rooted religious convictions? One way to resolve this conundrum is to examine the thinking and activities of Khruba Khao Pi (1889–1977), who was widely regarded as Siwichai’s principal disciple (*luk sit ek*) and successor. If Khruba Siwichai was generally handled leniently by the Siamese authorities, this cannot be said of Khruba Khao Pi, the “White Monk”. If any popular monk in the north was likely to be provoked into rebellion, it was him. He was born only a few kilometres from Khruba Siwichai’s natal village in Li district, Lamphun. Khruba Siwichai ordained him as a novice in 1905 and as a monk in 1911. Khao Pi’s opposition to the Siamese state and to the national *sangha* was vehement and uncompromising, at least until about the 1960s.¹⁹ This attitude presumably antagonised the *sangha* and secular officials, but disciplinary action against him was also “intended to showcase the newly-promoted *sangha* law which stated that a monk can be brought to trial in secular court if he was found to have violated state law” (Kwanchewan 1988: 128). In 1924, he was charged in a Lamphun court for not possessing an identification card issued to men registered for military conscription. He refused to accept the card and was imprisoned for six months. Khruba Siwichai re-ordained him. However, ecclesiastic authorities in Tak province charged him for eliciting contributions to build a ceremonial hall and district officials again ordered him to disrobe. In 1933, Khruba Siwichai ordained him again in violation of the 1902 Sangha Act, and Khao Pi was disrobed a third time. Thereafter he wore only

¹⁸ Buddhaghosa’s commentary divided the 5,000 years into 1,000-year periods. This periodisation has been followed in Lanna chronicles, such as the *Tamnan Mulasana of Wat Pa Daeng*. The final period culminates in the disappearance of all relics of the Buddha and of the Dhamma (Lagarde 2012: 91).

¹⁹ Kwanchewan states that he did not have direct conflict with the state or the *sangha* in the later part of his life, especially after he settled at Wat Pha Nam from 1963 to 1977 (2003: 283).

white robes but, nevertheless, still conducted himself as a monk (Kwanchewan 2018: 212).²⁰

Khruba Khao Pi had a wide following of Northern Thai devotees and from the Karen minority. He was identified by the Karen as “guardian of the spirits” and by followers from other ethnic groups as a *ton bun* and was attributed supernormal powers, such as clairvoyance and the ability to ward off malevolent spirits (Kwanchewan 1988: 150). He was also the principal assistant in Khruba Siwichai’s building activities and built or renovated many religious and non-religious structures himself.



Figure 2. Photo of Khruba Khao Pi and lay devotees, probably in the late 1930s or early 1940s (photo by author of a photo at Wat Phra Nam, Li district, Lamphun province)

Notably, Khruba Khao Pi did not at any time incite rebellion against religious and civil authorities. Thus, according to Peter Hinton, even though his Pwo Karen followers predicted that relations between the Karen and the Thai government would deteriorate, Khruba Khao Pi “urged no radical political action” (1979: 85). Rather, his indignation and dissent were expressed primarily through his writings, comprising palm-leaf texts, pamphlets, booklets and books written in the Lanna *Tham* script (with some later translated into Central Thai). These writings reflect the significant influence of traditional Lanna chronicles (Kwanchewan 1988: 134).²¹

Consistent with his holy man reputation, he announced that the eventual arrival of the future Buddha would be preceded by an age of moral and social deterioration,

²⁰ In January 2017, I interviewed the abbot of Wat Nam Pheung in Mae Wang district, Chiang Mai. He said that Khruba Khao Pi had built three small bridges in the village, and he noticed that he was wearing a monk’s belt (*phra khot aeo*) under his white robes.

²¹ For example, his *Mulasasana* is just an abbreviated version of the *Mulasasana of Wat Pa Daeng*, a history of the Wat Pa Daeng sect founded by Ñyanakhamphira (Kwanchewan 1988: 180).

culminating in “the age of common people and the ogre”, according to his *Pusati Sutta* (Kwanchewan 1988: 181). His booklet, *The Legend of Pho Cao Rai*, concerns “the calamity society will face when the 5,000-year Buddhist Era nearly ends, and of the birth of the ton bun” (Kwanchewan 1988:185) and in the *Pusati Sutta*, he warns: “Only those who industrially make merit shall be saved from such a calamity”²² (Kwanchewan 1988: 181).



Figure 3. Khruba Khao Pi at the construction of the Doi Suthep road, 1934. In the photo on the right, Khruba Khao Pi is seated at the feet of Khruba Siwichai. Photos from *Khruba Chao Siwichai: Biography, Daily Practices, Teachings and Charisma* (Bangkok: Lamphun People’s Association, 2018) (in Thai).

Arguably Khruba Khao Pi’s harshest and most vitriolic attack on the provisions of the Sangha Act was in his pamphlet, “The Two Religious Classifications” (*Nangsue Ong Sasana 2 Hong*), published in 1951, in which he compares “ancient religion” (*sasana boran*) with “modern religion” (*sasana samai mai*), and “indigenous religion” (*sasana phai nai*) of Lanna with “outsider religion” (*sasana phai nork*). Indigenous religion, he proclaimed, is the religion of the monk Ñanakhamphira, the leader of the strict Sihala sect based in Wat Pa Daeng, which became dominant during the reign of Tilokaraja in the 15th century—the Golden Age of Lanna’s political expansion (Swearer and Premchit 1978: 29). Consistent with this orthodoxy, Khruba Khao Pi criticised in this pamphlet the standardised monastic practices promoted by the centralised *sangha*, including the lack of strict observance of the eight precepts and the chanting of Pali verses in chorus.

Conclusion

According to Landes, millennialism “expects that spiritual strength will transform the world by transforming society” (2006: 6). However, he argues that this transformation can take disparate forms as the millennial vision “is ultimately a discourse about time”—on the one hand, the belief that transformation is imminent, that is apocalyptic, and,

²² Nattier argues that this calamity is such a gradual process of change and so far in the future that “it is not in any sense an apocalyptic event” (1988: 34).

on the other hand, that “the great transformation is far off into the future” (2006: 9). With reference to Buddhist millennialism, Nattier makes a similar distinction between the apocalyptic “here/now” interpretation of the Maitreyan myth and “here/later” prophecies of ultimate redemption in the distant future. In this article, I have argued for a similar contrast between the holy man millennial movements of the lower Mekong region and of northern Thailand, a distinction which has been ignored in past studies. In both regions, the dire political, economic and social conditions were similar in the early decades of the 20th century and conducive to millennial expectations and arousal among the populace. However, in southern Laos and northeastern Thailand, the holy men rebels were peripheral to the monastic order (*sangha*). They were, therefore, not constrained by religious traditions and rules of the *sangha* and were at liberty to transform the Maitreyan myth into an “ideology of rebellion” against French and Siamese state political intervention and economic exactions. In northern Thailand, by contrast, the famous holy men, Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi, eschewed violent rebellion despite their immense popularity, popular unrest and the harsh treatment of Khruba Khao Pi by Siamese authorities. There was thus a disconnection between the fervid millennial hopes of the populace and the religious convictions of these holy men. My explanation is that Siwichai and Khao Pi were not outsiders to the *sangha*, at least the northern *sangha*. Their primary mission was opposition to the “modern” Thammayut-inspired Sangha Act of 1902 and the survival of perceived orthodox “ancient” Lanna Buddhist traditions dating back to the founding of the strict Sihala sect in the 15th century and inclusive of Lanna Buddha chronicles, that uniformly predicted the arrival of future Buddha and his Golden Age in 5,000 years from Buddha’s enlightenment. In this long-range non-apocalyptic scenario, the imperative is not rebellion, but moral change and creation of moral communities in response to oppression and injustice. Nattier concludes that “it is not extraordinary measures of any kind, but rather the patient accumulation of the moral and spiritual prerequisites that will eventually lead to an encounter with Maitreya (1988: 28). Thus, the widespread millennial beliefs in northern Thailand in the early 20th century provided the *necessary*, but *not sufficient*, conditions for religious rebellion. The additional factor required was leadership inspired by an apocalyptic mythology, present among the holy men of the lower Mekong, but not among holy men of another kind—the holy men defenders of Lanna Buddhism.

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