

The Kha-Okasa Of Phra-That-Phanom: The Dynamics Identity Of The Buddhist Pagoda Safeguard In The Context Of Lao-Thai History And Politics

Bangperng, Kiattisak

*Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Thailand,
kiattisak.b@hotmail.com*

Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to study the dynamics of Kha-okasa cultural identity in the context of Lao-Thai political history. Kha-okasa are those assigned by rulers or kings to safeguard Phra-that-phanom pagodas and Buddhism in the context of Lao-Thai history and politics. They were the lowest-ranking member of the Lao feudal dynasty, dedicated to serving the monarchs' beliefs. When Laos became territory of Siam, the Kha-okasa became a state-controlled Lake-wat, and the Lao lords' authority was centralized in central Siam. Kha-okasa finally ended when King Rama V abolished slavery. However, as time passed, their long association with pagoda endowed them with the consciousness of Kha-okasa. They consequently try to maintain a substantial portion of the significance of Kha-okasa in relation to Phra-that-phanom pagoda, which serves as a holy symbol/center of religion for people on both banks of the Mekong River, as well as to accommodate cultural adaptability in the change. As a result, the Kha-okasa identity is dynamically adaptive to Thai Buddhism's sociohistorical context.

Keywords: Thai-Lao culture, Dynamic cultural Identity, Theravada Buddhism, The safeguard of Buddhist pagoda

Introduction

The Kha-okasa group is part of a widespread culture of Kalapana in Theravada Buddhism that originated during the reign of the great King Asoka, when he dedicated land and people to Buddhism for devotion and honor. The Kha-okasa evolved into a type of serf who served the Buddhist faith by looking after Phra-that-phanom pagodas¹. They were compelled to return to the kingdom and serve the country, which conferred certain rights upon them. This includes the right not to be charged tribute (Fine Arts Department, 2008) and the right not to be recruited during war (Fine Arts Department, 2008). Being "Kha"² is related with holy Buddhist symbols, which are expressed in Buddhist culture in terms of the administrative conditions in which the king must accumulate merit and charisma. As a result, the king

committed his population to Buddhist service, including as looking for pagoda, supporting monks, and laboring in temples. However, as Siam expanded their authority to colonize Lao, the incident impacted the Kha-okasa because they were now considered as a human resource or a citizen who was required to pay tribute — an activity deemed necessary in the economic and political climate of the time. Following that, the Kha-okasa were required to pay tribute to their lord and maintain the pagoda. Their culture thus disappeared symbolically in the perspective of the authorities. Nonetheless, they attempted to maintain themselves by expressing their individuality and establishing a connection with the pagoda. Tourism was marketed via the usage of the Kha-okasa culture. They invented the dance parade for the Phra-that-phanom festival merit making and collaborated to build tourism destinations via

the application of cultural capital. In the current day, the concept of Kha-okasa identity has been altered to allow general Buddhists who believe in pagoda to believe that expressing wishes or requesting children from the pagoda will assist in maintaining links with the Phra-that-phanom. Thus, the Kha-okasa were a dynamic phenomena and a significant composition that should be researched in order to get a better understanding of Buddhist culture in connection to its significance to people and places in various historical periods, particularly in Theravada Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia.

Phra-that-phanom pagoda and Kha-okasa

Buddhist culture in the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang follows Theravada Buddhism beliefs which spread into the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang during the significant periods when Buddha came to Sri-kotrabun and predicted the occurrence of the city and the Thapana Chedi which contained the Urangadhatu of the Buddha at the Phu-kam-phra (low hills near the Mekong River), also known as Phra-that-phanom (Fine Arts Department, 1994: 66). The Sri-kotrabun is an ancient district which influenced Theravada Buddhism, before the Khmer was influenced in the 12th - 14th centuries, and the local architecture in that area. Around the 19th century, King Fa-ngum (Lan Xang's first king) brought Theravada Buddhism from Cambodia into his land (Wipakpotchanakit, 1987). King Fa-ngum attempted to alter his traditional beliefs by dominating Buddhism, aided by his Khmer wife, though this was not totally obvious. Buddhism and traditional values have been incorporated into Lao culture and serve as a basis. On the other side, Buddhist culture has been exploited to advance government authority and elite status. Simultaneously, it was changed to become an unique characteristic of Lao civilization, such as integration with indigenous beliefs, and it developed into a significant component of society known as "Heet 12." (a tradition of making merit in each month of the whole twelve months). The relationship between the Buddhist culture in the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang and the community's livelihood is inextricably linked. The temple functions as both a holy and public location for a variety of social activities and a center for the cultivation of diverse arts and knowledge in both the secular and moral realms. Thus, monks

are expected to be experts in not only their disciplines, but also in the arts.

Additionally, the appointment of the monks empowered the villagers by allowing them to select and choose the monks they believe are called "Hodsong" (Hodsong is based on the monk's social class, i.e. Samret, Sa, Khu, Khu-laktham, and Khu-yod-keaw) (Srisawat, 1960). In many instances, the monks were adaptable and flexible enough to engage in seasonal events and merit-generating celebrations such as Fireball making and Songkran, or to assist people with jobs such as farming (Wipakpotchanakit, 1987; Srisawat, 1960). Nonetheless, the Kha-okasa was a social and cultural status associated with Phra-that-phanom, a sacred symbol that was historically significant to Laos on both sides of the Mekong River. According to the legend Urangadhatu (Fine Arts Department, 1940) and oral tradition, the Phra-that-phanom had a narrative. The legend is based on an occurrence that occurred around B.E. 8 when the Buddha paid a visit to the Suvanna-bhumi area and sat at Phu-kam-phra to predict the emergence and prosperity of Maruk-khakorn city, as well as stamping the Buddha's footprint as a symbol. On that day, the Buddha returned to Sri-khotraboon city for alms and returned to Phu-kam-phra with a second prophesy, predicting that Phu-kam-phra would be the residence of the five Buddhas in the prosperous eon, and recalled the Maha-kassapa monk at that time. Following that, the Maha-kassapa instantly presented himself in front of the Buddha. The Buddha instructed him, "Wait Kassapa, when I gain nirvana, you shall bring the Urangadhatu (Chest relics) placed at the Phu-kham-phra. Please do not disregard Tathagata's orders when the Buddha attains nirvana." When the Buddha passed, the Maha-kassapa transported the Buddha's Urangkathatu to Phu-kham-phra with 500 monks (Fine Arts Department, 1994). The rulers of neighboring towns, such as Praya-suvannapingkan (the chief of Nong-han-luang), Phaya-kham-daeng (the chief of Nong-han-noi), Phaya-chulamanee-phromthat, Phaya-inthaphat-nakorn, and Phaya-nantasen (the chief of Sri-khotraboon), became the president of the establishment of relics to enshrine the Buddha's Urangkathatu.

Each ruler constructed and contained many priceless artifacts, dividing them into five sections. They then desired a future life as a

Buddhist monk. The 500 Buddhist monks who were present beside the Maha-kassapa had also said amen and then returned to the Rajgir district of India to check the Tripitaka, just as the five rulers had done. Following that, Phaya-Sumittha-wongsa, king of Marukha-nakhon and director of the pagoda's construction on the Phu-ham-phra, followed the orders of five Buddhist saints and sacrificed 3333 individuals to protect Phra-that-phanom (Department of Fine Arts, 1967). Later on, these individuals are referred to as "Kha-okasa." However, in the context of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, the Phra-that-phanom pagoda became a sacred emblem of the state, worshiped by the monarch and all Buddhists. It also became a symbol for the rulers' responsibility to maintain, restore, and worship consistency since the kingdoms of Sri-khotraboon, Lang Xang, and Siam. In the kingdom of Lan Xang, rulers emphasized Phra-that-phanom as a vital object that needed to be maintained and repaired regularly, such as when Phra-chao-phodhi-sararat (king of Lan Xang, year 2063 – 2090) repaired the pagoda. He afterwards devoted the Kha-okasa to the service of the pagoda and patronized the monks during the reign of King-chaiya-chethathirat (king of Lan Xang, year 2091 - 2114).

When King Suriya-wongsa succumbed to the pandemonium in the Vientiane palace, the chancellors ascended the throne in order to grab power. A royal dynasty group had difficulties and went to the monks for assistance, which they received from Pra-kru-phonsamek monk, who possessed discipline and proficiency in the arts. He escorted them together with the army as they descended to the Mekong River in the direction of the southern area (Fine Arts Department, 1941). During immigration, the Pra-kru-phonsamek came to a halt at the river, resulting in the establishment of communities on the right (today referred to as Isan or Northeast Thailand), notably Ngiew-pan-lam-som-sanook hamlet. Due to the influx of refugees fleeing political turmoil during this historical period, the Pra-kru-phonsamek assembled his forces and completed the extra restoration of Phra-that-phanom in the Lan Xang style. This is a significant history of the Phra-that-phanom as it was constructed in the Lan Xang style (Bangperng, 2015) prior to Siam/Thai adjusting the pagoda's tip to make it more slender during the Phibun Songkhram field marshal era.

Thus, the Phra-that-phanom was seen as a sacred emblem of the Buddha, associated with both the Buddha's legend and the maintenance of the monarchy at the time. Phra-that-phanom is a holy symbol infused with traditional beliefs that symbolizes the religion of Thai and Lao people living on both banks of the Mekong River today.

Fieldwork methodology

This research paper is a project that collects data using a qualitative research methodology. I research documents such as legends, chronicles, and related research materials, as well as the fieldwork (participant observation) that took place in 2020-2021, to study and analyze the data. Locals and scholars from various Kha-okasa communities in Phra-that-phanom district, the Nakhon-phanom province, in Thailand, were interviewed. In addition, I also did fieldwork in the Kha-okasa near the Thai-Lao border. More importantly, I took part in the Kha-okasa people's important and infrequent rituals, such as the Phra-that-phanom merit-making ceremony and ritual for worshipping the three spirits (Chao Huen) in April. After compiling all of the data, I compared, evaluated, and analyzed it to verify the culture of Kha-okasa and to evaluate their negotiating strategies for presenting the contemporary sociocultural dynamic identities.

The Dynamics of social status and cultural identity in the context of Thai-Lao History and Politics

How did the The Kha-okasa get their name? How are the The Kha-okasa connected to Kalpana's culture? Kalpana is a type of religious patronage based on the concept of land dedication and work for the sake of religion. It originated in Hinduism, which was devoted to worshipping individuals who worked in temples. Later on, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism accepted this concept and propagated it throughout the local population (Phakphot, 1983; Office of the Prime Minister, 1967), particularly among the elites.

Kalpana is intended to generate Sattaya-thithan (praying for it to come true) for great merit in a variety of ways, for example, for Nirvana, the continuation of Buddhism for five thousand years, to be born in the era of Phra-sri-ariya-maitreya (a prosperous age), to devote oneself to the Buddha, and to accumulate merit for the good world in the next

life. Satya-thithan are concepts and beliefs that demonstrate a great commitment to Buddhism. They are expressed in the form of Kalpana (Klangwichai, 2017). The aristocracy want merit, and as a result, they keep supporting Buddhism by giving land and slave labor to the religion. Since the great Ashoka tailored the job of a monarch to be a virtuous person and serve Buddhism via erected pagodas, devoted land, and people to nurture Buddhism, the Kalpana culture has been found throughout all kingdoms that adopted Theravada Buddhism (Office of the Prime Minister, 1967). The great Ashoka is a good monarch who reigns over a happy realm. The emperor of the Dharmikha must administer the kingdom rightly, respect the dharma, and hold the dharma as administrative principles that would assist the people and kingdom develop, as stated in the Suttanta-pitaka Angutara-nikaya Jatukka-nibata unit 70, page 86.

In Buddhism, being the king is not the sole norm; they must also uphold Buddhism and serve as a model for others to follow in order to encourage happiness and prosperity. In the monarchy, Buddhism is regarded as the soul's core. Lanka, a Burmese kingdom, Ayutthaya, Lanna, and Lan Xang all adopted this concept. For example, in Lanna around the 17th century B.E., the legend of Phra-that-lampang pagoda stated that "... queen Chamadevi, the daughter of the Lanna King, celebrated the Buddha relics for seven days and nights; she arranged to offer a rice field worth a million cowrie as the field of the Buddha's relics; and she also offered her male and female slaves to practice the Buddha's relics" (Chotisukrat, 1972: 347). While the Kalpana retains the above-mentioned significance, certain features may be adjusted to suit the kingdoms' power structure or administration. For instance, Malayu pirates attacked the land west of Songkhla lake during the Ayutthaya dynasty. This conflict has devastated cities and temples. As a result, the monarch granted lands, farms, and servants for temple monks. Additionally, the king supported the temple and monks as the soul's core, establishing a monastic system such as the temples department to balance the monk's and local power, as well as community growth, which elevated the monks to cultural leaders (Phakprat, 1983: 129). As a result, the Kalpana is dynamic in nature, responding to changing social and political settings. This is a critical

element that I shall emphasize in the future while analyzing the culture of the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom.

It was assumed that the Lan Xang culture's ancient legends such as Urangadhatu and Kalpana (Kha-okasa) began when Phaya-Sumittha-wongsa erected a pagoda at Phukham-phra on the guidance of the five Buddhist saints and then dedicated around 3,333 Kha-okasa to serve Phra-that-phanom. Later in B.E. 200, it is apparent that the culture will survive throughout the following reign as well. According to Lao chronicles, king Phothi-sararat paid a visit to worship Phra-that-phanom and entrusted two members of the Kha clan, Kha Phan-ruen-hin and Kha Cha-eng, to serve Phra-that-phanom by bringing flowers, incense, and candles each year (Supamark, 1985).

During King Chaiya- chetthathirat reign, the king also looked after and safeguarded the Buddha relics, dedicating the Kha-okasa to them. The king is regarded as the landlord and god of life in the Lan Xang cultural system (Evans, 2006), but he is unable to control the entire kingdom alone, necessitating the distribution of land to nobles and other royal dynasties establishing chiefs of district in small areas to act as his alternate eyes. The monks also had a social status that cannot be ignored, since they were regarded as the village's head, and it can be asserted categorically that the monks influenced people through their preaching. In the instance of the growing Pu-mee-boon rebellion (or Pee-boon rebels), it is an example of how a reflection of power from local Buddhism has disturbed the power of the feudal system, as has occurred very frequently in Lao culture. Thus, support of the temples and service to the monks would establish a considerable balance of power. Giving land and people to monks was one of the strategies used to balance power. This account was recorded by Pastor Marini Romain, who rose to prominence as an evangelist under Suriya-wongsa's reign (the King who promoted Buddhism and is known to be one of the most prosperous in the Lan Xang kingdom). He wrote on the monks' authority, stating that "the religious power of the monks at this time may be considerable," until the monarch is required to be kind and sustain the connection, culminating in the monarch being friendly to the monks. Additionally, he feared that if there was confrontation with the monks, they might

inspire the populace to usurp his power. If he was always rigorous with the monks' discipline, they would seek retribution on the king as well. As a result, he needed to defend the monks and speak well about them in order to maintain the connection. If anybody want to be fortunate, influential in the kingdom, and possess the king's power, they must learn from the nobility who served the monks (Marini, 1999: 65). Marini mentioned the incident where monks made a mistake and the king was the one who considered exoneration, including the knowledge of magic which was owned by the monks who the Lan Xang people believed. This incident further affected the ability of the monk, which ordinary people were not able to do, thus people in Lan Xang believed in themselves and considered monks as privileged people who were highly respected (Romain, 1999: 60-65). Furthermore, the priest became arrogant and boastful as a result of the king's regard and patronage. The monks cured the ill in exchange for slaves and land when the monarch recovered. "As a mark of appreciation, the monarch devoted his servants of 1600 people to serve the monks and the land" (Romain, 1999: 64). In the Lao social hierarchical framework known as traditional feudalism, the Khoi or Kha-okasa are believed to have the lowest position. Originally, the king's dedication of land, objects, or even people to temples or Buddhism was regarded a temple treasure.

The kings had no ability to revoke ownership for individuals who had to serve the monks without getting recompense due to their lack of control over the realm, and when the monarch consecrated his territory for 5,000 years (Klangraphan, 2012). Aside from that, Lao society is a multi-ethnic society. Later, the Thai-Lao ethnicity gained dominance in the government system, forcing indigenous people to serve as slaves, and was dubbed "Kha," which means "slave" in Thai (Phumisak, 2013). The Kha were frequently herded as the master's property and traded in the market. In this context, Kha-okasa refers to the individual who has been consecrated to the temple by the master and cannot be referred to as labor. The Kha-okasa, or peasant, slave, or Kha ethnicity, inhabited the lowest socioeconomic station in Lao culture. During King Phodhi-sarat reign, he paid a visit to worship and rebuild the Phra-that-phanom, as well as consecrate the Kha-okasa and Kha Phan-ruen-hin as the leader of the existing The Kha-okasa, since the previous

generation had gone away. The Kha-okasa, on the other hand, worked in a similar capacity to normal slaves forced to work as laborers, but they did so for religious reasons, such as farming (which the monarch donated to the temple), sending tribute to the temples, and looking after the temples. Because they were not bound to serve for the government as a soldier or worker, they had greater privileges than ordinary slaves. According to Lao law, the Kha-okasa are unable to ordain as monks since they must serve Buddhism. Some evidence from the early Rattana-kosin period illustrates aristocrats' sentiments regarding these people: "They (Kha-okasa) were worse than a slave, who has a value that can be withdrawn freely, because they must be utilized for everlasting labor across generations of children and grandchildren. Those who had this type of kha-okasa, on the other hand, were presented to the temples as a herd of buffaloes that would multiply over a five-thousand-year period." (National Archives of Thailand No. Ror 5 Sor. 8.3/2.4 April Rattana-kosin era 125). As a result, the Kha-okasa are generally persons from the lowest socioeconomic strata. They were the ruler's servants who had been devoted to the temple. It is said to be a response to the ruler's Buddhist conviction that he or she cannot choose to be a serf in an intentional or purposeful manner. As an end, the Kha-okasa class is a cultural symbol that symbolizes not only the ruler's Buddhist beliefs but also the intricacy of the hierarchical social system, as well as the ruling and bargaining powers between the church and the kingdom.

The Siamese colonists strengthened their powers to colonize Lao during the beginning of the 24th Buddhist century under the reign of King Thon-buri until the start of the Rattana-kosin period. Siam, on the other hand, allowed the ancient system of government to persist. Siam was in charge of administration and tribute collection. The primary objective of dominating Lao society, politics, and culture was to establish a Siamese society with a structure similar to that of the Ayutthaya era, which was divided into two classes: the ruling class, which consisted of kings, lords, nobles, official staffs, and monks, and the subordinate class, which consisted of people and slaves.

Another group of people from the Kalapana culture had different names, such as a) Kha-pra, which refers to the person who the king dedicated to the temple to serve all temple

and monk activities and had to maintain this status forever (Juengniponsakul, 1985), and b) Yom-song, which refers to the kinship of monks who examined meditation and took care of theology graduation. They were given the privilege of working as royal laborers by the king. They were elevated from the Kha-pra department to Yom-song, which was a development because the work they were given was not as difficult, such as serving monks who were relatives (Wongviwat, 1981). c) Lake-wat, which refers to the Kha-pra and Yom-song who have been bestowed by the King from 25 households or more are known as chefs for the monks, which means monks servants in the ancient official language. The Kha-pra and Yom-song have a completely different experience at Lake-wat since they are royal slaves who only work at the temple for three months a year and do not belong to the temple or monks (Juengniponsakul, 1982).

However, the Bowring Treaty with England, signed in 1855, ushered in a transition that progressively transformed the country into a capitalist one. The Kha-pra were not as powerful in the temples as they had been in the past; they merely served and maintained the temples, as well as monks (Kanjanaomai, 1980). As a result, the temple's importance was diminished, and some monks paid government fees rather than recruiting laborers within Siam's socioeconomic framework. For the time being, the Kha-okasa retained their roles and responsibilities as "Lake-wat" who served the monks and the Phra-that-phanom (Klangraphan, 2012). The rights of the state or the people of the government that the king or ruler consecrates from 25 families or more are known as Lake-wat people. They will be required to labor for a temple or a Buddhist temple on occasion (It should be highlighted that they are not destined to be kha-pra, which means that the temple has complete control over them and that the state is unable to intervene).

The Kha-okasa who had served the Phra-that-phanom since the Lan Xang era were transitioned to be under Siamese authority, resulting in the meaning of Kha-okasa becoming "Lake-wat," - the person who had to labor for both religion and the state at the same time, implying that the government may re-call them. For these reasons, the Lake-wat were regularly captured by local authorities in Nakhon-phanom and Mukda for tribute, labor, and as their own slaves. As a result, the issue

was brought to Bangkok's central government's notice. The importance and prestige of the Kha-okasa shifted when political authority shifted from Lan Xang to Siam. The Lake-wat in Phra-that-phanom is battled to collect tribute and labor because it is located between the provinces of Nakhon-phanom and Mukdahan. Local rulers then tried to strengthen their influence by regulating and collecting tributes and laborers. As a result, the courtier and Lake-wat in Phra-that-phanom were immediately sent to Bangkok. Phra-sri-song-fa was nominated as Phra-pitak-chedi by the central government in Bangkok to be the ruler of the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom. The central government in Bangkok was the only administrator of Kha-okasa. His Majesty King Chulalongkorn gave the governor jurisdiction over the rest of the Kha-okasa who agreed to work in any city and pay tribute.

Later, Chao Phaya-pasakorn-wong (a Siamese noble) requested that Kha-pra, Yom-song, and Lake-wat return to the central government and exchange money for the temples' maintenance, but were resisted by Prajak-silla-pakhom noble. King Chulalongkorn refused to accept because administrative units would lose their benefits; as a result, Prajak-silla-pakhom noble presented a solution including the control and expediting of money collection. During this time period, Kha-pra, Yom-song, and Lake-wat underwent another significant transformation, as they were required to pay wages rather than labor for the temples. In 1945 (during the reign of King Rama V), the Conscription Act was adopted to officially abolish slavery in Thailand, resulting in the Kha-pra, Yom-song, and Lake-wat becoming soldiers, as well as the emergence of the French colonies, in order to acquire control of the Mekong River on the left. King Chulalongkorn accelerated the improvement of local government in the Isan district, or on the right bank of the Mekong River, to make it more concise and issued an order prohibiting governors and nobility from forcing people who established houses on the east bank to cross over to the right bank and become slaves.

Thus, the Kha-okasa (both the social position and cultural identity) were abolished in order for them to be treated equally with other ethnic groups in Siam. It is worth noting that Siam's growth necessitated interactions between Buddhism and culture that spanned both the state and local governments. The Kha-okasa are thought to have been absorbed into

Buddhist culture under the name "Lake-wat," devaluing the meaning and privileges of social class since the Lan Xang dynasty, and became citizens who were no different from slaves and required to pay tribute to their governments. When the government benefitted from these individuals, they attempted to seize control of them as soldiers and workers, which resulted in conflict with the local chiefs who had absorbed these people into their own power. In this occasion, the Kha-okasa or Lake-wat of Phra-that-phanom negotiated with the central government in Bangkok, which resulted in the central government accepting responsibility for the complaint. However, during the reign of Monarch Rama V, the Kha-okasa encountered new challenges when the king implemented a program of slavery abolition, which had a detrimental effect on the Kha-okasa position, which disappeared from Thai social and cultural identity. However, the Kha-okasa's long relationship with the Phra-that-phanom had shaped their confidence as they attempted to negotiate for the continuation of their social status in the past, even if they were unsuccessful during the age of reformation and transformation under the northeastern local government, particularly during the reign of King Rama V in Thailand. However, as socioeconomic governance evolved, circumstances and negotiation areas for cultural identity restoration emerged. The Kha-okasa used their cultural resources, such as historical memories and cultural names that indicated their relationship with the Phra-that-phanom, to construct an identity in response to situations such as tourism, which will be described in the next section.

Cultural Identity Dynamics in Contemporary Thai Society

At the present, Phra-that-phanom and Kha-okasa are administered by the Thai state, which has undergone significant political and sociocultural transformations. Kha-okasa has adapted to the changing structure of Thai state authority in the contemporary era. The long-standing association with Phra-that-phanom pagoda resulted in the realization of being the Kha-okasa. For those who identify as Kha-okasa, symbols such as the name, the legend, or the history of being Kha-okasa have reproduced, interpreted, and constructed identities. Throughout political, social, and economic upheavals, the Kha-okasa attempted to demonstrate their cultural identity not just as

a symbolic one, but also as one connected to the pagoda's function in the local people's religion and livelihood. In other words, the pagoda had a significant role as local and regional representations of Buddhist religion. Cultural identities associated with the pagoda's past or with Phra-that-own phanom's cultural features impacted the Kha-okasa identity, which was also valuable and significant.

According to the traditional culture of Kha-okasa, when the harvesting season arrived, each Kha-okasa was required to deliver rice, crops, cereals, Prasat-phueng (pile of merit), and other offerings to the pagoda. This is referred to as the "Sia-kha-hua ritual—paying temple taxes rather than being obliged to labor by the state" and is a significant tradition for Kha-okasa. Additionally, it is referred to as the "Kao- Pi-chapak Offering," a significant cultural resource for the Kha-okasa.

Thailand, on the other hand, has promoted tourism from the end of B.E. 2500 (Wisuthilak, 2013: 7) and continues to do so now as a strategy for national development (Aneksuk, 2015: 10-11). As a result, tourist policy, particularly cultural tourism, had a considerable local effect (Bangperng, 2015). In this context, Phra-that-phanom, the Isan local culture's identity, proved to be an essential symbol of cultural value for tourist promotion. As a result, the annual pagoda merit festival on the 15th waxing moon of the third month (dubbed the Third-month Merit festival (Boon Deun Sam) or the worship of Phra-that-phanom), which was organized to honor the pagoda, included a tourist component. The Kha-okasa introduced the custom of "Kao-Pi-chapak Offering" in order to invent, create, and express the identity of the Kha-okasa in pagodas, as well as inventing the Phra-that-phanom dance in order to demonstrate good art and culture in tourism. Since ancient times, the third month pagoda worshipping event has been an old celebration in the community. It is a parade of Phra-upakut (Buddha images) from the Mekong River to Kha-okasa communities surrounding the pagoda, headed by the president of "the Association for the Development of the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom" (Khampong, 2020: Interview). According to Khampong (2020: Interview), who is also known as Kha-okasa, this event may have taken place under the reign of Phra-kru-viroj-rattanabol, who repaired the pagoda

in the early 1900s. The yearly celebration, which was conceived as a "invented culture," included a greeting ceremony. King Rama IX paid a visit to the pagoda in 1955, and the Kha-okasa were given the opportunity to perform a magnificent dance in front of the throne (Saipan, 2016). During this occasion, the Kha-okasa had the chance to express their dance to the rest of the community as a means of demonstrating their identity as Kha-okasa and the significance and value that the community collectively generated. Following that, the dances were presented by various groups of women in a variety of styles, becoming an integral part of pagoda worship as well as on significant occasions when organizing other pagoda-related activities, and even more so in the context of contemporary tourism in Thai society in terms of cultural, economic, and national development.

In terms of tourism, the Nakhon-phanom Provincial Government Office has formed a tourist marketing program for the province's eight tribes and designated the Phra-that-phanom pagoda as a provincial symbol. There is a metaphor for expressing that "the pagoda is like the living rooms of Nakhon-phanom Province" (Khampong, 2020: Interview), which refers to tourism, culture, and religion. A well-known occurrence in the field of tourism is the worship of the birthplace's relics (7 days), with Phra-that-phanom as the primary emphasis. Tourism has also had an effect on the pagoda and Kha-okasa. The Kha-okasa surrounding the pagoda have contributed material resources, culture, customs, and a way of life to the creation of tourist materials and the establishment of the Association for the Development of the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom, which contributes to the area's tourism growth. Additionally, the Kha-okasa adapted the Isan's 12-month custom (Heet 12) in order to create a tourism culture that allowed the Kha-okasa to demonstrate their culture (and welcome tourists) every month of the year.

This phenomena showed tourism's adaptability to sociocultural changes by inventing, creating, and interpreting a new culture for tourist. For example, the Kao-Pi-chapak Offering was interpreted from the Sia-kha-hua rite, in which they were not charged tribute to create merit to worship the pagoda, both of which are relic merit-making and a cultural display for tourist about traditional Buddhism culture in the current day. According

to field research, villagers descended from the Kha-okasa who attend the pagoda festival state that "the Kha-okasa are required to come and dance in order to worship the pagoda, which is seen as a necessary aspect of merit-making" (Phonrat, 2020: Interview).

Additionally, though the Kha-okasa community diminished with the change of administration, the Kha-okasa community (centered on Phra-that-phanom temple) preserved the myth of "being descended from the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom" (Paripunno, 2020: Interview). Certain individuals assert that they are "descendants of Kha-okasa" and rely on temples to sell souvenirs in exchange for visitors paying homage to the pagoda for prosperity. All communities in the area of the pagoda are Kha-okasa and descendants of the pagoda" (Apaiao, 2020: Interview).

However, the interpretation of "Kha-okasa" as "the descendants of pagoda" indicates that the Phra-that-phanom's association with a holy symbol that impacts daily life in the community qualifies them as descendants of the pagoda, which has evolved into a holy symbol that protects their lives. The "Kha-okasa" has evolved into a symbolic explanation of being "the descendants of Phra-that-phanom" in the context of change, allowing the local people or Buddhists to refer to themselves with the ambiguity of this meaning. Buddhists can refer to themselves as descendants of the pagoda in general, as well as through a rite called "Tang-khan-ha." Additionally, the Buddhist sect valued the pagoda as a sacred symbol capable of blessing their offspring (This sacred feature is widely known among Buddhists who respect the pagoda). Children born as a result of the pagoda's blessings will have a bond with the pagoda. With the community's interpretation, it became possible for outsiders to use the term Kha-okasa, or descendant of the pagoda, which was extensively distributed throughout both local and inter-regional areas.

The research on Kalpana or Kha-okasa, on the other hand, aims to define the meaning, historical development, role, and significance of Buddhist culture (Athan, 1999; Phakprot, 1983; Klangraphan, 2012), as well as the cultural characteristics and social networks associated with Buddhist culture (Athan, 1999; Phakprot, 1983; Klangraphan, 2012). (Klangwichai, 2017). However, when it comes to racial and ethnic features, ethnography's essentialism revealed that they lacked racial or

ethnic identity (which is currently being debated). Rather than that, the Kha-okasa's existence is governed by their social status, more precisely their link to the monarchy and religion as a result of being committed or entrusted as a Buddhist servant. Originally determined by social status, the Kha-okasa's meaning has evolved in reaction to political, governmental, and economic events. As a result, the Kha-okasa's status and identity have evolved into a cultural past that has developed into a "imaginary memory" that is applied in the present through tourist integration. I identified that while the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom has waned in terms of its traditional meaning as a social status in Lan Xang culture, it has continued to interpret and reproduce identities through memory and historical imagination in response to interacted conditions such as tourism and invented history. Thus, comprehending the cultural practices that underpin their identities via explanations and interpretations of new meanings may assist cultural practices engaged in negotiations, interpretations, and cultural adaptation in accordance with the Buddhist culture's situations and circumstances.

Conclusion

The Kha-okasa are a group of individuals who were committed to serving as pagodas, monks, and Buddhists without an intrinsic affinity to Buddhism, but rather as a social status based on the religion's ties with the monarchy. The Kha-okasa is a Kalpana culture that is frequently found in Southeast Asian Buddhist nations as a sort of religious patronage with the notion of land consecration and as religious laborers. It is likely that the culture was impacted by Hindu tradition, which provided opportunities for individuals or slaves to serve in temples. In the framework of Lao culture, the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom not only expressed the concept of common culture in the Kalpana, but also the complexity of a hierarchical social structure known as a feudal system, in which they were at the bottom of the traditional Lao social structure. As a result, they became the first group to be permanently consecrated to the temple with complete temple power. It also showed the elite's authority and the patronage connection with religion. The Kha-okasa were one of the methods to favour the monks and Buddhism, while the religion was encouraged to sustain the administration's authority and

righteousness. The local Siamese colonies had strengthened their influence to govern the Lao kingdom in the early 24th Buddhist century, resulting in Lan Xang being colonized by Siam's social system. The Kha-okasa changed their status to "Lake-wat," giving them a half-citizen status, and they were forced to serve monks and Buddhism while simultaneously paying tribute to the state, prompting the governor to contest them as laborers until the central government in Bangkok put them under their control. Later, when King Rama V abandoned the slavery regime, the significance of Kha-okasa degraded and went away. However, the Kha-okasa's long association with the pagoda had formed their consciousness, which was imprinted in their culture, as well as the pagoda's symbolic value in the surrounding villages, which was consistently maintained. In addition, changes through politics, the economics, and society created the conditions and space for re-constructing the cultural Kha-okasa identity in tourism. Thus, the Kha-okasa used cultural resources such as historical recollections, cultural names, and descendants of an imaginary ancestor to establish a tourist identity that represented the pagoda's identity in the sense of "the Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom." This enabled them to present their self-importance during the pagoda's annual merit-making festival by inventing traditional dances in which they worshiped the religious symbols, allowing tourists to recognize their cultural traits and affiliation with the Phra-that-phanom.

Additionally, they formed groups to develop regions, cultural artifacts, customs, and ways of life that aligned with contemporary tourism trends and the government's tourism promotion strategy. Thus, the Kha-oasa is an agency that demonstrates a dynamic sense of identity in historical and changing situations. The phenomena relating to the Kha-okasa described in this article demonstrate a Buddhist culture that has been adapted to local values, culture, and ideology. Specifically, it was the politics and administration of Southeast Asia's central government that resulted in the culmination of power relationships and social status. The Kha-okasa were a group of slaves who were believed to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the Lan Xang and Siamese Kingdoms of Theravada Buddhism. They evolved dynamically in response to a power relationship until they acquired a consciousness

and took action on which power to adapt to and exploit in each situation. As a result, Theravada Buddhism is founded on doctrine-based principles and karma-based concepts that represent individuality and equality. It is possible that it is incompatible with sociocultural realities. In the example of the Kha-okasa, it demonstrates that Buddhist culture and doctrines may need to be evaluated and reassessed in terms of politics and change, with an emphasis on adaptation to local society, culture, and ideology.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the 2559 B.E. research project "The Kha-okasa of Phra-that-phanom and social-cultural capital: from the cultural community to tourist adaptation in the contemporary environment," which was funded by Mahasarakham University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. I'd like to thank the funding source, as well as everyone in the Kha-okasa community, for their contributions to the research's success.

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