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The collection of eight articles presented by Paul T. Cohen in *Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism* gives fascinating insights into a strand of Theravāda Buddhism that has received little scholarly attention until now. At the heart of contemporary Lanna Buddhism, which is mainly practiced in the areas around Chiang Mai (Thailand), the borderland of neighboring Myanmar and, to a lesser degree, in Laos and southern China, lies the work of the *ton bun* (person of merit), charismatic holy monks. Since many of these monks see themselves in a lineage with the famous Khruba Siwichai (1878-1938) and share several distinctive characteristics, some scholars speak of a “khruba movement.” Khruba translates as “venerated teacher.” It is not an official title given by governments or the sangha hierarchy, but is given by local communities out of veneration. In the context of Lanna Buddhism and the “khruba movement” it refers to *ton bun*—monks who are believed to be holy and who share a number of distinct qualities. According to Paul Cohen, one defining feature of the khruba movement is the “paradoxical combination in this holy man tradition of other-worldly asceticism and this-worldly activism” (p. 1); the latter mainly being expressed through religious building activities while the former refers to ascetic practices like constant wandering, vegetarianism, eating only one meal a day, strict meditation, and the associated attainment of supernatural powers. Ferocious temple-building projects can be witnessed in many parts of the Theravāda world. What is especially noteworthy about the *ton bun*’s building of temples and subsequent communities is that those are framed in the broader narrative of the Lanna chronicles (*tamnan*), which include legends about the Buddha’s visits to the Lanna region. These building projects thus transform spaces into “Buddha-Lands” and thereby build

new moral communities. Since most followers belong to marginalized non-Tai minorities (or non-Bamar minorities in Myanmar), this has social as well as political implications.

The book thus not only serves as a good introduction to Lanna Buddhism, but uses the latter as a focal point to contribute to several broader scholarly arguments concerning such topics as: sainthood and charisma, retraditionalization and modernity, conceptualizations of the relationship between the spiritual and the material as expressed in religious building activities, or the role holy men play for ethnic minorities. Due to the variety of the subjects covered, at times I was unable to see a unifying thread. Nevertheless, this variety is one of the strengths of the book, showing that the study of Lanna Buddhism is not only worthwhile in itself but can add fruitful perspectives in these broader arguments. In the following, I seek to shed some more light on these topics by giving summaries of the eight articles and, in the process, hope to fairly evaluate some of their strengths and weaknesses.

As many famous khrubas were disciples of Khruba Siwichai and some are even believed to be his reincarnation, it makes sense that Kathrine A. Bowie’s article, “Khruba Siwichai. The Charismatic Saint and the Northern Sangha” gives an introduction of this prototypical *ton bun*. Siwichai lived in difficult times. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Thai state was in the process of strengthening its stronghold in the northern provinces, and part of that was the expansion of the influence of the Thammayut order. The northern sangha was at that time fairly independent of the sangha of central Siam/Thailand and Siwichai was a vocal opponent of

the new policies. His confrontational attitude led to his repeated incarcerations as “a traitor to his religion and his king” (p. 29). His support among the local populace, which was afflicted by famines and epidemics, grew, giving rise to millenarian beliefs in Siwichai as the future Buddha Ariya Metteya. While Bowie’s chapter serves as a good introduction to the sociopolitical context and the northern sangha out of which the khruba movement grew, it falls somewhat short of portraying Siwichai himself. We only hear about some highlights of his life and his relationship to the northern sangha, but those could have been more closely examined in conjunction with the analysis of the broader context. Since many of the other khrubas covered in this book are closely linked to Siwichai, this would have helped to better illuminate Siwichai’s function as a role model and how this influences the works of modern ton bun.

The second chapter, Paul Cohen’s “Charismatic Monks of Lanna and Isan: A comparison,” gives context from a different angle by means of comparison. The lineage of Ajahn Man mediated through the works of Ajahn Chah and several Western monks like Ajahn Sumedho or Thanissaro Bhikkhu, seemingly became the “blueprint” for forest monks in the eyes of Western practitioners. From a scholarly perspective, it also received considerable attention in the writings of Tambiah, Taylor, Keyes, and others. Drawing on these works, Cohen gives a concise overview of the main similarities and differences and argues that “the modern holy man tradition of Lanna is a form of Buddhist revivalism and active utopianism, in contrast to the eremitical, world-renouncing and ‘mystical’ arahant tradition of Achan Man” (p. 59). Cohen explains the khrubas’ works toward building an active utopia (a concept he borrows from Zygmunt Baumann) as one of their defining features: in this conception, an ideal society can only come about through the collective efforts of many—it is not a prophesied utopia but one that has to be actively built. Although monks in the Achan Man lineage are not conceptualized as ton bun, some of the main differences between the two are increasingly weakened through the influence of business elites on both lineages: in the past, the Achan Man lineage was characterized through a lack of building activities—that has changed and grandiose building projects are also carried out by monks of this lineage. However, other distinctive characteristics set the khruba movement clearly apart, especially the active utopianism and the accompanying stylization of khrubas as bodhisattas or even as the future Buddha who will reign over a utopian community, and these are topics that other authors in the book

explore further.

Whereas the first two chapters give an introduction to the broader context, the following parts go into more specific topics. In chapter 3 “Partners in Power and Perfection: Khrubas, Construction, and *Khu Barami* in Chiang Rai, Thailand,” Anthony Irwin introduces a fascinating side topic. While all ton bun are believed to have perfected *parami* (the “10 perfections”), two famous monks in the line of Siwichai, Khruba Kham La and Khruba Intha, are believed to be *khu barami*—“a pair of entities that are united in the cultivation of *parami* over numerous rounds of rebirth” (p. 88). *Khu barami* is an interesting example of how *kamma* and kammic connections between people are locally conceptualized. In the context of the book it provides a broadened perspective on *parami*, an ideal central to both the ton bun and ideals of righteous kingship in Southeast Asia, and helps to underline its importance in the khruba movement.

In “Building Moral Communities in an Uncertain World: A Karen Lay Buddhist Community in Northern Thailand” Mikael Gravers takes a deeper look at Huai Tom, a Karen Buddhist community that was founded by Khruba Wong. Gravers shows how local legends, rituals, and the Buddhist cosmological imaginary get translated and embedded in a modernized community, reflecting important points such as conversion as a way to avoid poverty and community-building as a means of social critique. The strength of Gravers’s text lies in the depth of his historical accounts and his anthropological observations. For example, he gives a concise description of the history of Khruba Wong’s founding of Huai Tom and goes on to explain that “Wong and the Karen constructed their own narrative related to the chronicles (*tamnan*)” (p. 131), thus putting their religious building activities, ritual, and especially beliefs about Khruba Wong (e.g., that he is a bodhisattva) in the context of a wider cosmological imaginary. In other parts of the text though, Gravers’s writing lacks this attention to context and detail and becomes generalizing. In the subsection entitled “Moral Leadership, Royalty and Secular Power,” he tries to explain “the Karen’s” uneasy relationship with the Thai state and their perspective on the Thai Royal family and on Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Thai prime minister who was deposed in a 2006 coup. The Huai Tom community is only mentioned sparsely in this section and “the Karen” (or at least the Karen people living in Thailand) are treated as a homogenous entity.

Furthermore, one of the theses Gravers puts forth is, in my opinion, problematic in itself and becomes a ma-

major drawback in an article with only little space to build an argument. Gravers explains that Huai Tom “is an example of how the notions of *lokiya* (the mundane and material world) and *lokuttara* (the spiritual and supramundane world of Buddhism) are combined into a singular community of temples and lay settlement” (p. 116) and later concludes that “a modern imaginary of an ideal (utopian) world with a balance between *lokiya* (the mundane world) and *lokuttara* (the spiritual, sacred world)” (p. 142) is formed. This might be due to the reviewer’s limited knowledge, but I have not come across any examples of interpreting *lokuttara* in a spatialized framework in Theravāda contexts. The text remains unclear if this is Khruba Wong’s or the Huai Tom community’s usage of Pali terms, or Gravers’s interpretation. Either way, it is clearly at odds with the usage in the Pali Canon,[1] because there *lokuttara* is not conceptualized as a “sacred world” but as the supramundane which defies everything worldly. Thus, Gravers’s claim would require a complex line of argumentation, which he does not deliver.

In the next chapter, “A Karen Charismatic Monk and Connectivity across the Thai-Myanmar Borderland,” Kwanchewan Buadaeng portrays U Thuzana, a Karen monk from Myanmar whose activities span both sides of the border. Using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of assemblage and drawing on Gravers’s earlier works, she aims to show why different groups of people—Karen followers of khrubas in the “Siwichai lineage,” Karen migrant workers in Thailand, and wealthy Thai business people—are attracted to U Thuzana’s works and teaching. The first group mainly follows U Thuzana because they perceive him as a successor of former khrubas “who built moral communities among the Karen in preparation for the coming of Ayya Metteyya, the future Buddha and his utopia” (p. 157). Thus the cosmological imaginary associated with U Thuzana is the main driving force behind their worship. Followers among Karen migrant workers in Thailand are often initially drawn to U Thuzana by his religious building projects and the opportunity those create for making merit in ways they are accustomed to. Besides that, the merit-making rituals create a space to “feel at home” and “to connect with local Thai people, and even develop closer relationships with their employers who agree to have the events organized on their premises” (pp. 158-59). Wealthy business people also seek to make merit by, for example, financing building projects, but their involvement is also “enhancing their own charisma and their charismatic authority over their Karen workers.” According to Buadaeng, these three groups form an assem-

blage because their different forms of participation in the monk’s work support each other and help to expand U Thuzana’s network, both in Thailand as well as across the border.

Although this all connects well to Gravers’s chapter and gives an interesting perspective, her chapter is, at times, stuck in descriptive accounts and remains thin on an analytical level. Furthermore, her account lacks the critical approach needed to provide a more balanced understanding of the subject. For example, the relationship between U Thuzana and his followers among the Thai business elite who employ Karen migrant workers should be reflected on more critically: merit-making rituals create an additional layer of dependency of the Karen migrant workers on their employers who organize the rituals. This mutual merit-making creates a “kammic bind” and the workers become obliged to their employers.[2] In addition, the chapter does not address the implications of U Thuzana’s Buddhist missionary work among Karen who are predominantly Christian, including the building of pagodas on church compounds.[3] For decades, the former military junta supported Buddhist missionary work among the ethnic minorities as a means to expand their scope of control, a trend that seems to be continuing.[4] The most severe shortcoming of Buadaeng’s chapter is that it overlooks vital information that should have drastically changed her treatment of the subject: in recent years, U Thuzana has been accused of inflaming interreligious tensions and seems to have strong ties to the infamous MaBaTha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion).[5] Different research questions might have revealed that Myaing Gyi Ngu, a community seventy kilometers north of Hpa-An that was set up by U Thuzana and functions as his base of action in Karen State, is a self-declared Muslim-free zone.[6] While some of this would have emerged after the chapter was written, it is also possible that these connections of U Thuzana’s were already visible. It is worth considering how these affiliations change how we understand him as a ton bun.

Sean Ashley’s writing in chapter 6, “Khruba Holy Men and Dara’ang Buddhism,” takes a look at the ethnic group of the Dara’ang, who fled the Shan States, Myanmar, to neighboring Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s. Many Dara’ang are followers of Khruba Thueang, who resides near Chiang Mai. Ashley describes their relationship in detail and in this way explores the social implications of Buddhist revivalism and devotion to the khruba movement among disadvantaged ethnic minorities. The Dara’ang are in a difficult situation in Thailand, both economically and socially: they often live in

economically disadvantaged rural areas in the highlands and prejudiced views of them as uncivilized or prone to criminal behavior are common among city-dwellers and other wealthier inhabitants of the lowlands. Social stigma is furthermore formed through beliefs that ascribe droughts and floods in the lowlands to the highlanders' methods of farming. Khruba Thueang actively supports Dara'ang communities in Chiang Mai province in holding Buddhist ceremonies while many Dara'ang in turn help the khruba in his religious building endeavors. According to Ashley, that helps them to regain a sense of identity and inclusivity. The devotion to the monk furthermore creates strands of millenarian beliefs that provide a counter-narrative against the social stigma: some Dara'ang believe their lives to be improving because of strict adherence to Buddhist virtue and the lowlanders' situation to deteriorate due to a decline in Buddhist values. Drawing from these observations, Ashley frames the charisma of the ton bun monks in a very fruitful way by not taking the charismatic personality into focus but the contexts in which charisma is enacted: "Looked at in terms of crisis and revitalization, charisma appears less a matter of extraordinary qualities possessed by certain individuals than of extraordinary situations which position them in such a way that they are able to speak to the needs and desires of their addressees" (p. 186).

In chapter 7, "Khruba Bunchum: The Holy Man of the Twenty-First Century and His Transnational and Diverse Community of Faith," Amporn Jirattikorn reflects on Khruba Bunchum. Bunchum was born and ordained in Thailand but spent many years in Shan State in Myanmar and became increasingly popular among several ethnic minorities. That eventually led Myanmar's then military government to take steps against him, and he relocated to Thailand in 2004. Since then Bunchum has become famous for various Buddhist building and renovation projects in the Mekong borderlands and especially for a three-year solitary retreat in a cave in northern Thailand, which ended in 2013. Amporn Jirattikorn consciously does not focus on ethnic highlanders, Buddhist revivalism or resistance against the state, because she holds that the above categories are insufficient for analyzing Bunchum: "The emergence of a diverse, transnational community of faith that transcends the Thailand-Myanmar border today represents a case of a changing religious environment and requires a different framework of analysis" (p. 195). Instead, using Arjun Appadurai's concept of imagination, she takes into account the use of social media in the creation and circulation of meaning. This interesting approach leads her to a con-

clusion that should spark further discussion: "The phenomenon of Khruba Bunchum reveals that today religion is no longer limited to a 'sacred' realm, traditionally conceived, but has rather become a floating sign, in which a sacred figure can be consumed, reconstructed and redefined by different groups of followers" (p. 213).

Although I do not think that religion ever was "limited to a 'sacred' realm" (rather following Talal Asad[7] and others who have pointed out that the boundaries between "religious" and "secular" are fluid and the two mutually constitute each other), I believe that Jirattikorn's argument holds some merit. The consumption and redefinition of religious topoi and symbols in visual media spheres in regard to Buddhism in Southeast Asia is understudied and, in my opinion, deserves further attention.[8]

The last chapter, "Millenarianism, Ethnicity and the State: Khruba Bunchum Worship among the Lahu in Myanmar and Thailand," deals with the famous Khruba Bunchum as well. Tatsuki Kataoka's account is important, because he picks up crucial aspects that were insufficiently addressed in the other chapters. First, he analyzes in a practical way how Bunchum bypasses the institutionalized state control of Theravāda Buddhism: the old pagodas that Bunchum rebuilds do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Religious Affairs, but of the Department of Arts. Furthermore, Bunchum, not being closely affiliated to any temple, carries out most of his work through a foundation under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Second, and even more importantly, Kataoka critically reviews the khruba's missionary work and its impetus. Bunchum, who is according to Kataoka "seriously concerned with the rapid spread of Christianity" (p. 240), becomes in a certain way an agent of the state himself: "In a sense, what Bunchum is bringing about in the highland communities is a kind of spontaneous propagation of Buddhism in the hills, which both the Thai and Myanmar governments have dreamed of for so long" (p. 241). The last chapter is also meritorious for other reasons: Kataoka's sensible anthropological reflections make for good reading and show how the Lahu's devotion to Bunchum is embedded in their millenarian beliefs in a coming god, merging him with a lineage of past saints and making him the current reincarnation of their god.

Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism is a recommendable source, especially for religious studies scholars and anthropologists working on Southeast Asia, the cultures and peoples of the highlands, and (Theravāda) Buddhism. The book could have been even more rewarding

if the engaging anthropological descriptions would have gone hand in hand with more analytical depth. Occasionally bridges could have been built to scholarship on related topics in neighboring countries, notably Myanmar: the work of scholars like Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière or Thomas Patton on Weikza, Buddhist “wizards” whose practices also relate to the coming of the future Buddha, to name one similarity, or of Guillaume Rozenberg, who explores the relationship of renunciation and power and also portrays monks who engage in extensive building projects, comes to mind. A more critical outlook on some of the monks portrayed and the structures in which they operate would have been beneficial as well. Despite this, Paul T. Cohen and the other contributors have created a fascinating book about a truly fascinating field of study. The diverse chapters become pieces of a mosaic that create in deepening circles important perspectives on this complex topic. I hope it finds many readers.

Notes

[1]. Lokuttara means “supramundane” and refers to the (Buddhist) path (*magga*) and its fruition (*phala*). For a short description see Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), 174.

[2]. For an exploration of how the former Burmese military government used merit-making rituals to increase their acceptance among the populace and as a form to control their subjects, see Juliane Schober, “Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture: State Patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Myanmar,” *History of Religions* 36, no. 3 (1997): 218-43.

[3]. See AFP, “Myanmar monk builds pagodas in church and Muslim area,” Mizzima: News from Myanmar (website), April 28, 2016, <http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/>

myanmar-monk-builds-pagodas-church-and-muslim-area.

[4]. See, for example, Juliane Schober, “The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 307-25; 318.

[5]. See Justine Chambers, “Buddhist extremism, despite a clampdown, spreads in Myanmar. Ethno-nationalist monks have resisted a state bid to restrict their views and activities targeting Muslim and other religious minorities,” *Asia Times*, August 13, 2017, available at <https://www.asiatimes.com/2017/08/article/buddhist-extremism-despite-clampdown-spreads-myanmar/>

[6]. I obtained a (private) photo of a signboard at the entrance to Myaing Gyi Ngu that states that Muslims (the signboard uses the word “Kalar,” which is a derogatory word for people of ethnically Indian origin but is mostly used for Muslims) are denied permission to enter this “Buddhist sanctuary” (*thathana myay* in Burmese, which roughly translates as *sāsana* “earth/soil”).

[7]. See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 27ff.

[8]. In her seminal work *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Jane Naomi Iwamura analyzes how themes and figures of Buddhist and Hindu religions become multimedially transformed, consumed, and hence engrained in US popular culture. I am not aware of any extensive works that take up a similar strand of analysis in regard to Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

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