

## **Affirmation of Shan Identities through Reincarnation and Lineage of the Classical Shan Romantic Legend ‘Khun Sam Law’**

Khamindra Phorn  
*Department of Anthropology & Sociology*  
*Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University*  
khamindra\_p@cmu.ac.th

### **Abstract**

*Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim* is an 18th-century legend popular among people in all walks of life in Myanmar’s Shan State. To this day, the story is narrated in novels, cartoons, films and songs. If *Romeo and Juliet* is a classical romance of 16th-century English literature, then *Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim*, penned by Nang Kham Ku, is the Shan equivalent of William Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Based on this legend, Sai Jerng Harn, a former pop-star, and Sao Hsintham, a Buddhist monk, recast and reimagined the legendary figure as a Shan movement on the one hand, and migrant Shans in Chiang Mai as a Shan Valentine’s celebration and protector of *Khun Sam Law* lineage on the other. These two movements independently appeared within the Shans communities. This paper seeks to understand how this Shan legend provides a basic source for Shan communities to reimagine and to affirm their identities through the reincarnation and lineage. The pop-star claims to be a reincarnation of *Khun Sam Law*, while the migrant Shans in Chiang Mai, who principally hail from Kengtawng, claim its lineage continuity.

**Keywords:** Khun Sam Law legend, Khun Sam Law Family, Khun Sam Law movement, Sai Jerng Harn, Sao Hsintham, Kengtawng

## Introduction

According to *Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim*, a popular folktale originating in Myanmar’s Shan State, *Khun Sam Law* was a young merchant from Kengtawng, a small principedom under Mongnai city-state. As a young man, he was in love with a local girl named Nang Oo Peim, and travelled often across the Shan State to conduct his trade. His frequent absences were a source of loneliness for Nang Oo Peim, who remained at home with Khun Sam Law’s widowed mother. While harboring ill-thoughts, pretending to love her new daughter-in-law, Khun Sam Law’s mother employed several methods to inflict harm on Nang Oo Peim, who eventually died.

One day, returning to his mother’s village from a trade mission, Khun Sam Law noticed that a funeral was under way. Shortly after, he learned that Nang Oo Peim, his beautiful wife, had perished and the preparations were for her burial. He could not bear to live without her and took his own life, so that he could be reunited with her in the afterlife.

In mythology, the two brightest Orion Stars known in Shan language as “*Lao Kan samta*” (two facing stars against a pole with 3 signs) and visible on a clear-sky at night in the Orion Belt, were believed to be the incarnation of Khun Sam Law and Nang Oo Peim, the two young lovers who were separated on Earth but were reunited and found eternal love amongst the stars. The tragedy had tremendous impact on both sets of families. Khun Sam Law’s mother became remorseful and apologized to other family members for her behavior towards Nang Oo Peim and her own son. So tightly woven is this love story into the rich tapestry of Shan ethnic identity, that some people actually believe it is a true story.

The legend of Khun Sam Law and Nang Oo Peim is as popular among the younger generations of ethnic Shans as it is among the elders, frequently featuring in novels, cartoons, films, songs and school textbooks, as a form of romantic love expression. Truly, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* masterpiece of tragic young love has its eastern equivalent in the romantic legend written by Nang Kham Ku (1853-1919), daughter of Sao Kang Hso.<sup>1</sup>

Now based on this legend, Sai Jerng Harn, the former pop-star, and Sao Hsintham, a Buddhist monk, recast and reimagined the legendary figure as a Shan movement on the one hand, and migrant Shans in Chiang Mai as a Shan Valentine’s celebration and protector of Khun Sam Law lineage on the other. Interestingly, these two events are not related, nor do they share a strong connection. This paper

---

<sup>1</sup> Sao Kang Hso (1787-1881) was one of the great nine Shan scholars (Sao Khu Maw Tai). Nang Kham Ku composed the legend around 1875-1880.

argues that this Shan legend provides basic sources for the Shans to reimagine and to reaffirm their identities through reincarnation and lineage. Sai Jerng Harn claims to be a reincarnation of Khun Sam Law, while the Chiang Mai migrant Shans, who trace their roots mainly to Kengtawng, assert their claim to lineage continuity.

## Research Contexts

In the context of this research, it demonstrates two movements: Khun Sam Law *Movement* refers to Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn led movement in Shan State while Khun Sam Law *Family* represents the migrants Shans of Kengtawng in Chiang Mai. The former's two co-leaders of the Movement, reimagined the legendary figure as a powerful being promoting the Buddhist concept of loving-kindness (Pali: mettā), for friendship, equality and justice in society; and then paraphrase the Movement to reinstate the golden days of the Shan nostalgic past. This Movement emerged upon this specific historic moment given the recent political developments and social changes in the Shan State of Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Khun Sam Law Family, through literature, legend and history, attempts to portray the Shans as a united brotherhood, to love one another and their nation, and affirming Shan identities. Both movements use the same source of legendary literature to reimagine their nation with different approaches. The monk and the pop-star have appropriated Buddhist concepts and amalgamated them with non-Buddhist elements, which in this context I call 'hybridization'. The migrant Shans, on the other hand, appropriated the romantic story with the modern idea of Valentine's Day and proclaimed its continuity and/or unbroken lineage.

Interestingly, the Khun Sam Law Family in Chiang Mai and the people of Kengtawng believe that Khun Sam Law is a real historical figure, readily dismissing the notion of legend. For instance, in Kengtawng, places associated with the legend include Khun Sam Law's meeting point with Nang Oo Peim, on the banks of the Tein River, the remains of Nang Oo Peim's alleged house, a horse apparently turned to rock, the graveyard which is the same sign of the Orion Constellation, and so on. They discount people who dismiss the story not as true fact, but as a fanciful, non-existent story.<sup>3</sup> They have announced to the wider world that all these characters

---

<sup>2</sup> Burma or Myanmar: this article treats 'Burma' in a colonial and post-colonial historical sense until 1989, the year the country became officially known as 'Myanmar'. From this point onward, 'Myanmar' is used to mean present history and current situation.

<sup>3</sup> Courtesy of LSF Video documentary, Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim 7 & 8.

did indeed exist in the past and were not merely imaginary characters. In this context, followers of Khun Sam Law organize Valentine's Day not only to renew the devotion of the two tragic lovers, brotherhood and their nation, but also as an affirmation of Shan ethnic and cultural identities.

"*Love*, what we emphasize here is not just for a romantic one but should be extended to equality and justice to one another. Through this literature we also wanted to show that the Shans have unique history, culture and nation. I would request that the world recognizes the Shan Valentine's Day," said Sai Leng Wan, the organizer of the Valentine's Day and leader of the *Khun Sam Law Family* in Chiang Mai.<sup>4</sup> "I think the romance story is real; and I want people to be in real love like Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim as an ideal figure, but I don't want to see them dying just for romantic love. It is far worthwhile if they can sacrifice for the nation," said a member of Valentine's Day organizer from the Khun Sam Law Family.<sup>5</sup>

### *Geographical settings*

Kehsi, some 136 km from Kengtawng, in Central Shan State (Figure 1), is the region where the Khun Sam Law movement, led by Sai Jerng Harn, is most active. The "region of the movement's domain", in my mapping, includes Mongnawng, where Sao Hsintham lives, Monghsu (Wanhai), the location of the Shan State Army Northern command (SSA-N) HQ in Kehsi, and Kengtawng, the birthplace of Khun Sam Law according to legend. These townships in the region are well connected, as people travel through them on a daily basis. The present Kehsi administrative township, before 1948 and prior to Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule, was a city-state ruled by Shan hereditary Saopha (prince), one of the 33 principality's city-states until the end of British rule. The majority of the people in the region are Shan but there are sizeable other ethnic groups, such as Ta'ang, Kachin, Burmese, ethnic Chinese, Yanglai and Yanglam (ethnic Karen). All of these groups speak different languages or local Shan dialects. At present, most of these ethnic groups practice Theravada Buddhism, which has replaced animist or ancestral beliefs, prevalent in the region long before the arrival of Buddhism. Devotees adhering to Christianity, Hinduism or Islam are also found but in very small numbers.

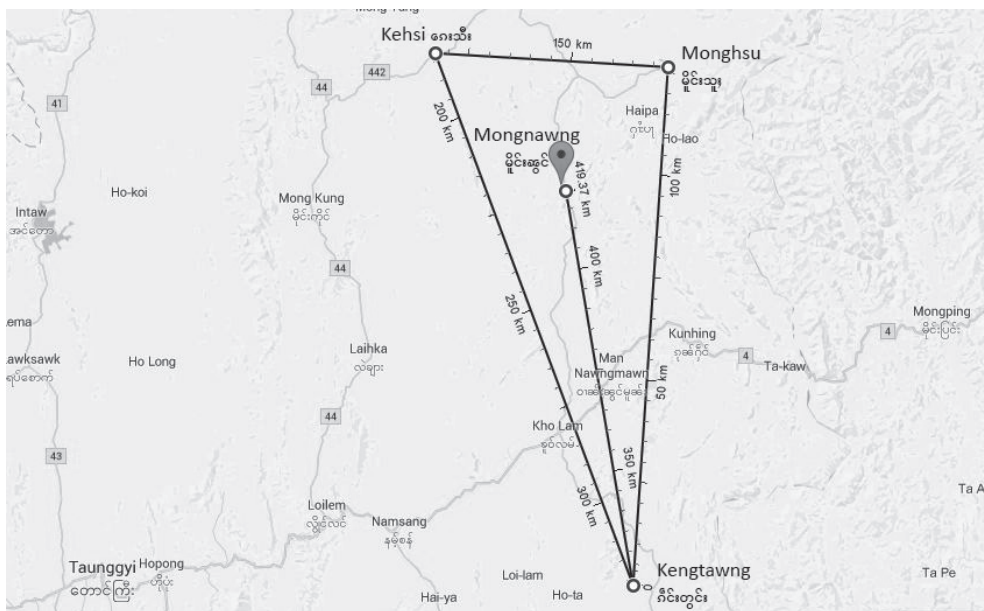
Between this region and the banks of the Salween River, stand some 4 mountains, said to be located in an area of strategic importance for military warfare.

---

<sup>4</sup> Courtesy of Tai TV, Interview by Nang Hern Kham. Facebook.com/khunsarmlawfamily kengtawng/ Accessed: April 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Courtesy of Tai TV, Interview by Nang Hern Kham. Facebook.com/khunsarmlawfamily kengtawng/ Accessed: April 2015.

The SSA-N has operated in this region for over a decade. Until 2014, the Burmese Army had made several attempts to capture these strategic mountainous regions, with limited success. According to some military analysts, these mountains make it possible to attack the enemy from different directions.<sup>6</sup> Overlooking the Salween River towards the east, the enemy can launch an attack against the Wa army or United Wa State Army (UWSA) bases in Pangsang, located on the other side and bordering with China. These mountains are locally known as Loi Khawk, Loi Zay, Loi Lan and Loi Khio.



**Figure 1** Map showing Kengtawng, birthplace of Khun Sam Law, according to legend, and Sai Jerng Harn’s movement areas. [Source: Google Map].

#### *Actors in the region of movement’s domain*

The relationships and interactions among different ethnic groups, agents and power-players in the region, are considered as important here. Prominent figures in this research include: Shan State Sangha Council (SSSC), local and regional levels, Buddhist monks, Myanmar Local authority, villagers, local people and the SSA-N.

---

<sup>6</sup> Aung Kyaw Zaw, an independent Burma observer based on the Sino-Burma border. Burmese military launching two parallel campaigns. SHAN. Accessed: January 2015. <http://english.panglong.org/burmese-military-launching-two-parallel-campaigns/>

People from this region (likely from most corners of Shan State), be they male or female, young and old alike, have migrated to Thailand in large numbers. The reasons behind this mass exodus are numerous, not just for Thailand but also for migrants to other neighboring countries. Some reasons may be directly related to the long-standing conflict but other migrants have left to escape conscription for Shan soldiers, while others have left in search of economic opportunities or to seek a better life. Many of these migrants have settled in northern Thailand, particularly Chiang Mai, although sizeable numbers have also settled in its central and southern provinces. Most people work in factories, in agro-gardens, in the building industry or as domestics. As migrants, their status is either documented or undocumented (MAP Foundation, 2015).<sup>7</sup> However, today most of the migrants from Myanmar hold valid work permits, as the Burmese authorities continue to issue temporary passports to its citizens through the National Verification or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In 2010, a bilateral MoU was signed by Thailand and Myanmar, setting out procedures for the certification of undocumented Burmese migrants, to enable them to work legally in Thailand. For decades, these migrants have made frequent visits to their hometowns in Myanmar's Shan State. However, following the political reforms of 2011 and the opening up of Myanmar to foreign investment, increasing numbers of migrants are returning home to begin a new life in the country of birth. Despite these developments, statistics published by the Chiang Mai-based MAP Foundation confirm that migrants from Myanmar's Shan State are still arriving in Thailand.

The report confirms that mass migrations from Myanmar are linked not only to hardships but also to weak political rights, difficulties with the armed movements and local power players, including the SSA-N mentioned earlier, the Pa-O National Army (PNA),<sup>8</sup> the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)<sup>9</sup> and also drug traffickers, as an added source of complications (MAP Foundation, 2015).

Apart from heavy taxes, young men are also subject to conscription into the different ethnic armed movements. To escape these unfavorable circumstances or situations, people employ a number of tactics. Within the narrative of James Scott's 'the art of not being governed' (Scott, 2010),<sup>10</sup> fleeing to neighboring countries such as Thailand affords a 'secured' sanctuary. For the Shans, there is no more

---

<sup>7</sup> MAP = Migrant Assistance Programme.

<sup>8</sup> The PNA is the military wing of the political organization of the Pa-O people in Myanmar.

<sup>9</sup> The TNLA is the armed wing of the PSLF political organization (Palaung State Liberation Front).

<sup>10</sup> Scott, (2010). Scott's controversial study deals with the 100 million people inhabiting *Zomia*, the name coined for the lands at altitudes above 300 metres, stretching from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to the northeast of India, and traversing Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma. Scott defines *Zomia* as "the largest remaining region of the world whose people have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states" (Scott, 2010: ix). For an interpretation of Scott's concept on 'the art of not being governed', see, for example, the critique by the Burmese academic Michael Aung-Thwin (Dove, Jonsson, & Aung-Thwin, 2011).

highland to run to for cover; many remote Buddhist monasteries have been emptied or destroyed, forests devastated and natural resources extracted, entire villages relocated and their farmlands confiscated; so they settle on the plain for safe haven, for its modern conveniences, better security and job prospects with potentially higher earnings. Myanmar government agents have now reached most corners of the hilly areas in Shan State. In reality, the Shans in their new home in Thailand, are far from 'being free from governed' as they imagined, because they have to comply with 'regularization' within the terms set by the Thai nation-state, a series of rules issued for migrants (MAP Foundation, 2015). They are liable to being arrested and deported for their illegal status. Nevertheless, their status as migrant workers in Thailand still gives them some hope and freedom to earn a living, an improvement of sorts had they remained in Shan State. Migrants from Shan State experience a new life, some aspects of 'modernity' and a 'bittersweet' feeling in Thailand. One thing in common among the Shans is that wherever they may be, they visualize their homeland as a "nation". Re-imagining Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim as Romeo and Juliet is one way for the migrant Shans in Chiang Mai to bear testimony to their rich cultural heritage.

## Methodology

The digital technology is becoming more pervasive in all aspects of our life. In the last decade, the size of our 'online' world has expanded and increasing numbers of people live in a 'virtual' world. Often, this 'virtual' world poses problems for anthropological researchers who live in its predecessor, the conventional 'real/actual' world (Boellstorff, 2012; Whitehead & Wesch, 2012), in their efforts to find out what it means to be human in terms of social and cultural life. This challenge has extended to my research for this paper, with the findings and approach supported by digital anthropology,<sup>11</sup> which has enabled me to closely observe celebrations in honor of

---

<sup>11</sup> Digital anthropology is the study of the relationship between humans and digital-era technology, or, technology and extends to various areas where anthropology and technology intersect (Wikipedia). Research in this exciting domain demonstrates anthropology's relevance and provides valuable perspectives regarding the relationship between technology and culture (Tom Boellstorff, 2011). It is sometimes grouped with sociocultural anthropology, and sometimes considered part of material culture. The field is new, and thus has a variety of names with a variety of emphases. As currently used, "digital anthropology" overlaps with terms such as "virtual anthropology" (Weber, Gerhard & Bookstein, Fred. (2011). *Virtual Anthropology: A guide to a new interdisciplinary field*. Springer.), and is in conversation with other fields (Tom Boellstorff, 2011). Techno-anthropology (Aalborg University, <http://www.en.aau.dk/education/master/techno-anthropology/>, Accessed August 28, 2015); Digital ethnography, cyber-anthropology (Knorr, Alexander (2011)), "Cyber anthropology" (Peter Hammer Verlag GmbH), and Dumit, Joseph. Davis-Floyd, Robbie (2001) *Cyborg Anthropology*. Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women.

Khun Sam Law through various media, including video clips posted on social media networks, DVDs, leaflets, news reports and so on. Coupled with my own interviews and sources from my informants, this suggests a major shift in anthropology as a discipline. In this paper, digital anthropology applies to both expressions of the Khun Sam Law movements. The information and data, interviews and video clips related to both movements were obtained through social media reports, websites, and my own interviews and from informants.

The renewed visualization of Khun Sam Law as a notion to recast the nostalgic past of the Shan kingdom, is based on a combination of literature reviews on related studies, concepts, personal interviews and video clips of the movement, all of which are widely available on social media networks, VCDs and documentaries on Khun Sam Law promoted by the movement team, either for sale or free of charge. A few interviews were obtained through personal contacts or report analysis.

In addition to the use of digital anthropology in the virtual-fields, I also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with knowledgeable elderly Shans in Chiang Mai, some key informants in Kehsi conversant with the movement, and an informant based in Tachileik, the border town on the banks of the Mae Sai River, in Shan State, across from Thailand. Before the movement was widely known, I also met Sao Hsintham in person.

## **The birth of Khun Sam Law movements**

Although the Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim legend has been retold for a long time in songs, video-movies, school textbooks and even in cartoon form, Khun Sam Law as a movement is a relatively recent phenomenon. It resurfaced as two distinct features among the Shans: in the guise of a mass Buddhist movement and as an expression of popular culture. A pop-star and a Buddhist monk led the movement, initially confined to its region of domain in Shan State, while migrants in Chiang Mai claimed an unbroken lineage in cross-nation through the Valentine’s Day celebration, the cultural re-creation and re-enactments. While the former is a religious sentiment, the latter is a form of cultural evolution, affirming the nation and identity. Now this section explains how the movements led by the pop-star reemerged as a form of modern Khun Sam Law in Shan State, on the one hand; and the Valentine’s Day celebration, to advance a claim of Khun Sam Law’s lineage among the migrant Family on the other.



### *Movement in Shan State*

Since January 2014, news, rumors and gossips about the Shan pop-star have gone viral when he claimed to be the reincarnation of Khun Sam Law. In video clips, shared and tweeted across social media networks, Sai Jerng Harn appeared as a ‘modern’ Khun Sam Law. Dressed in princely robes or as a spiritual healer, the pop-star has received daily visitors at his palace, ‘Haw Seng’, located in Wan Napang, Hawan Tract, Kehsi Township, in the southern part of Shan State (Figure 1). Many people in the region believe that he is the incarnation of Khun Sam Law, all the more so as this incarnation seems to have been prophesied by Khruba Bunchum,<sup>12</sup> a respected Buddhist monk across transnational Buddhist communities in the Golden Triangle region. The legend of the movement derives from the pop-star’s popularity, his co-leader’s credentials of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and the well-respected Khruba Bunchum’s prophecy. The movement’s popularity reached its zenith in March–July 2014 but from August onwards, visitors to his palace gradually declined, partly due to criticisms voiced by some Shan Buddhists, particularly by the SSSC. For this reason, Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn found it more difficult to spread their ideology and expand their activities.

Apparently, the pop-star claimed that celestial beings communicate with him before undertaking any activity. For instance, the number of points – 227 – in the Chinese game of *mahjong*, also equals the 227 Vinaya rules of the Buddhist disciplinary codes. According to the *mahjong* logic, everything in the world is a game; whoever masters the game to become a talented player, will be rewarded. The Shan Buddhist *sangha* does not appreciate this analogy between the Buddhist monk’s code of conduct and the points on the mahjong game. However, from another perspective, Sai Jerng Harn’s analogy does not imply that “the Vinaya code is for gambling”, as pointed out by numerous Buddhist *sangha*, but rather they highlight conflicting expressions in Shan/Myanmar society.

Nevertheless, people in the region believed that the pop-star was the legitimate incarnation of a modern-era Khun Sam Law, judging by the long stream of visitors and devotees that beat a path to his door. While popularizing its movement, the pop-star began to gain more followers. “I am not against any religion but I adapt to all forms of religious practices including Theravada Buddhism. Some people are

---

<sup>12</sup> It has been rumored that Khruba Bunchum has uttered prophecies while meeting Sai Jerng Harn during his visit to Mong Mao region in 2010. This claim, however, cannot be independently verified. Sai Nanti, Sai Jerng Harn’s helper at his palace, who is interviewed in the video clip of March 2014, claims that Khruba Bunchum has indeed made some prophecies.

wrongly accusing me as a destroyer of Buddhism,” said the pop-star.<sup>13</sup> Every year in April, on the occasion of the Myanmar New Year celebrations, people tend to devote themselves to religious activities and visit sacred places. Coincident with the occasion in 2014, Sai Jerng Harn’s fame spread further across and beyond the region, when a group of locals produced and distributed VCDs of the Khun Sam Law movement, uploading video clips on Facebook and across other social media. According to news reports and eye witnesses, Sai Jerng Harn received around 300 visitors a day.

The creative re-imagination of Sai Jerng Harn generated the kind of interest that made people visit his palace, to view first-hand this “modern Khun Sam Law”. People may be convinced that Sai Jerng Harn personifies the real Khun Sam Law, a kind of savior for the forces of spirit he may have incorporated in his practices. These pilgrim-like visitors are an important aspect of ordinary people’s lives, which have experienced tremendous changes in their communities. Pilgrims appear to be joyful and whole-heartedly undertake their journey to the palace to meet the ‘new Khun Sam Law’. This may be due partly to his popularity as a singer and partly as a result of the pilgrims being offered the chance of freedom or relaxation. For most of the people visiting his Haw Seng, it was a trip down memory lane, to the days when they enjoyed encounters with a popular pop-star.

### *Sai Jerng Harn*

This section details Sai Jerng Harn, a co-leader in the Khun Sam Law movement. It also summarizes the ideology behind the movement. Allegedly a reincarnation of Khun Sam Law, Sai Jerng Harn is said to be receiving guidance from a spiritual being. He has been a singer, song-writer and public performer for over a decade, and a media and public figure. His songs range from romantic love to expressions of Shan identity, history and culture. His songs appeal to male and female fans, young and senior alike. His last known public performance was in 2012, at the golden jubilee celebration of Pariyatti Saddhamma-pala Foundation in Panglong, where the SSSC’s main administrative center is located. Sai Jerng Harn prior was already practicing meditation before he stopped his music career and public performances. It has been suggested that by the time he started his meditation, he had already experienced symptoms of a mental disorder. Before establishing himself as Khun Sam Law, he was criticized for making inaccurate predictions in 2013, when he imagined gems and precious stones paving the bottom of a public pond at Mongnai. The local inhabitants began to dig the pond but though no gems or precious stones were found, the water

---

<sup>13</sup> Khan Sam Law movement Video DVD, 2014.

outlet became blocked, rendering the pond unusable for a while. Nevertheless, Sai Jerng Harn continued to meditate, eventually visiting *Shweyingyaw* Congregation, the Burmese exorcist practice, and seeking guidance from Sao Hsintham.

It appears that, at some point, both Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham met Khruba Bunchum together for advice but details of this meeting, or indeed any advice given, are not in the public domain. Informal sources from Tachileik claim that Khruba Bunchum advised Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham to devote themselves for a time to solitary meditation in a cave in the region, where their movement was active.

### *Sao Hsintham*

Sao Hsintham, a native of the movement's domain region, is a key leader in the Khun Sam Law movement. Early in his life, he was received into the monkhood as a novice and has resided at several monasteries and Buddhist institutions in Myanmar for training and education. He was a dedicated student and a well-read Pali scholar. In the late 1990s, Sao Hsintham joined the Ceylon Journey for higher education in Sri Lanka. After gaining Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Buddhist studies from Sri Lankan institutions, he returned to Shan State in 2005, where he became one of the most influential figures in the region, rising to the status of State Sangha Mahanayaka and President of the regional Shan Sangha. As a scholar, *dhamma* preacher and high-ranking *sayadaw*,<sup>14</sup> he is well known among the people and different authorities (the government and the SSA-N) in the region. However, the Shan Sangha and some Shan Buddhists voiced their concerns when he became a co-leader in the Khun Sam Law movement.

Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham have known each other for many years, with the former treating the latter as a younger sibling. In a video clip, Sai Jerng Harn claimed that the two had indeed been siblings in a past life. Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham portray themselves as related in kinship, a united and charismatic front in this movement.

For the SSSC and the majority of Shan Buddhists, however, Sao Hsintham has been a controversial figure due to the nature of his movement. The SSSC, in particular, adheres to the Myanmar *sangha* of Theravada Buddhism and is less predisposed to polarity, the spirit world, shamanism or *alawng* practices (*alawng* is a bodhisattva who will attain *Buddhahood* when the condition is fulfilled in a distant future). According to the SSSC, in promoting the Khun Sam Law movement, Sao

---

<sup>14</sup> *Sayadaw*, Burmese origin (saya 'teacher' / 'tutor' + daw 'royal' = 'royal tutor'). Today the term is used for monk who is an abbot, in-charge of an institution/monastery, or regional, provincial, and local appointed or promoted as Sangha-nayaka (chief-monk), or simply a well-respected monk.

Hsintham attempted to deviate from the mainstream of Theravada principles and stood accused of breaking Buddhist *vinaya* rules, the orthodox tradition of Myanmar and Shan Sangha Order. Though some consider Sao Hsintham's practice as unorthodox, he has, however, assured the SSSC that his actions do not deviate from the Shan Theravadin tradition.

### *Sao Awn Kengtawng (Alawng)*

Apart from the pop-star, two princesses (the wives of pop-star) and Sao Hsintham, there was an *alawng*, the important figure known as Sao Awn Kengtawng,<sup>15</sup> a leading figure in the movement, which people treated like a real *alawng*. Sao Hsintham believes that Sao Awn Kengtawng is an *alawng* who will achieve his own emancipation and liberate others in the process. In most of the video clips where the *alawng* appears, he barely utters a word. But his role in the movement is unclear, though Sao Hsintham portrays him as an *alawng*, a bodhisattva in their midst, making the movement more legitimate, secure and protected. Though Sao Awn Kengtawng is a novice monk, he dresses like a prince in the movement's ceremonial events.

If this movement is best understood in terms of millenarianism, the explanation is certainly associated with the *alawng*, whose promotion has been linked to the prospect of a better life in years to come. A number of Buddhist millenarian studies, however, associate with *Metteyya* (sometimes spelt *Arimetteyya*) concept (Cohen, 2000; Keyes, 1977), a future Buddha (Sanskrit: *Aryamaitrīya*), holy-man ('Sao Myat') or ton bun ('source of merit') in a Thai context (Cohen, 2001), in which case Sao Awn Kengtawng does not seem to claim. Nevertheless, according to Sao Hsintham, Sao Awn Kengtawng is destined to be a bodhisattva and will eventually become a Buddha in an incalculable number of epochs (*asankheyya-kappa*) within a great aeon or world cycle.

### *The controversy and criticisms*

Sai Jerng Harn's claims have given rise to a variety of reactions, controversies, even suspicions and vagueness among the people, particularly the Shan *sangha*. The criticism has been more pronounced on the part of the Shan *sangha*, who insisted that the pop-star should desist from making claims of legitimacy and that Sao Hsintham should not support his cause. The *sangha* saw this movement as 'unreligious' because it aims at benefiting one individual - Sai Jerng Harn - through

---

<sup>15</sup> Sai Jerng Harn and Sao Hsintham have stated that Sao Awn Kengtawng is an 'alawng', recruited to act in accordance with his mission in life.

a mix of religious cult activities, legend, Buddhism, local beliefs and nostalgia of a bygone era in the Shan Kingdom, as will be detailed later. According to some Shan monks, these views of Shan history and actual Shan historical events are distorted. Moreover, some sources maintain that Sai Jerng Harn has departed from accepted norms, displaying lack of respect towards socio-cultural values, particularly as it is rumored that he persuaded a 14 year-old girl to marry him.<sup>16</sup>

Among criticisms by Shan Buddhists, those from the *sangha* were particularly strong, whose opposition to the movement included a request to the SSA-N to scrutinize the movement's activities. Nonetheless, Sai Jerng Harn's popularity continued unabated, drawing huge crowds to his *Haw Seng* palace in Kehsi. Although the Shan *sangha* was attempting to invalidate the Khun Sam Law movement and the process by which his palaces had been acquired, for months devotees and visitors flocked to the sites.

However, by early August 2014, oppositions from the Shan *sangha* became stronger. A Shan monk, familiar with the movement and a local in the region, said that "Sai Jerng Harn's movement is alright as long as he does not relate his public talks to the principles of monasticism and Buddhism. But his preaching is contradictory to Buddhism. He destroyed not only the story of Khun Sam Law and its legend but the principle of monastic rules and concepts of Buddhism."<sup>17</sup> Following comments from some high-ranking Shan *sangha* representatives, the SSSC and Kehsi *Sangha* Committee attempted to thwart the movement, when the Kehsi *Sangha* Committee issued a statement on 25 April 2014, requesting the authorities to investigate the pop-star's activities.<sup>18</sup> The SSSC also summoned Sao Hsintham, with Order No. 2/2014 (27/05/2014),<sup>19</sup> for clarifications and to ask him to stop supporting Sai Jerng Harn's movement.

On his visit to Chiang Mai in early February 2014, Sao Hsintham declared that: "the Shan course referring to political armed movements cannot reach their aim as they do not follow my advice and suggestion."<sup>20</sup> What he meant is that the Shans need to consider a new approach or an alternative to Buddhism for a solution. "Being a Buddhist monk, by using dharma alone, our cause for emancipation,

---

<sup>16</sup> Information gathered from several people, including monks, in April-May 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Interview with Sao Hsaiwan, Singapore, in June 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Panglong (SHAN). Sangha-sao hai-aw-lueng sai-gerng-harn pham-heit-khun-sam-law ("Sai Jerng Harn requested for investigations: Shan Sangha"). Shan Herald Agency for News. <[www.shan.panglong.org/news/general/3770-2014-04-29-15-59-31.html](http://www.shan.panglong.org/news/general/3770-2014-04-29-15-59-31.html)>. Accessed: June 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Order No: 2/2014 (27/05/2014) was signed by the presiding president of the Shan State Sangha Council (SSSC).

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview, February 2013.

liberation, freedom and dignity may not be realized. We need to use ‘other-worldly’ external power to help us,” said the monk, who promotes the Khun Sam Law movement in Shan State.<sup>21</sup>

### *Shan Valentine’s Day in Chiang Mai*

As mentioned earlier, communities of Shan migrants in Chiang Mai claim direct descent from Khun Sam Law, claiming that he was a ‘real historical figure’, as a way of revitalizing their Shan ‘identity’. The Shan Valentine’s Day celebrations are a new phenomenon, a way for the Shan communities to reimagine the past in a modern context. Notwithstanding the generally accepted notion that Khun Sam Law is a mythical character, people in Kengtawng revere him as an historical figure, refusing to believe that he may never have existed in real life. They reconfigured Khun Sam Law not only as a symbol of true love and an exemplary figure of masculinity, but also claimed its unbroken lineage. This shows a reinvention of legend transported into our modern world. According to calculations which cannot be independently verified, January 22, 2015 was Khun Sam Law’s 1000th birthday.<sup>22</sup>

The Chiang Mai-based Khun Sam Law Family, together with the Kengtawng-based Shan Culture and Literature Society, organized the first millennium anniversary at Wan Parsar in Kengtawng (Figure 2), Shan State.<sup>23</sup> In 2014, Khun Sam Law’s allegedly 999th birthday was celebrated on the occasion of the Shan Valentine’s Day in Chiang Mai.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> According to Pu Loi Hom and Pu Loi Tun translated version of Khun Sam Law – Nang Oo Peim legend, Khun Sam Law was born in 376th Sakkaraj year in the Burmese calendar, equivalent to 1015 CE. Nevertheless, the same legend (The Origin Stars: Tai Mythology of Khun Sam Law and Nang Oo Peim), retold by Sao Noan Oo (also known as Nel Aldam), Khun Sam Law was born in 1786 CE, which puts the 1,000th birthday at a much later date.

<sup>23</sup> According to Pu Loi Hom and Pu Loi Tun translated version of Khun Sam Law – Nang Oo Peim legend, Khun Sam Law was born in 376th Sakkaraj year in the Burmese calendar, equivalent to 1015 CE. Nevertheless, the same legend (The Origin Stars: Tai Mythology of Khun Sam Law and Nang Oo Peim) retold by Sao Noan Oo (also known as Nel Aldam), Khun Sam Law was born in 1786 CE, a year that would place his 1000th birthday anniversary to a much later date .



**Figure 2** Khun Sam Law's millennium birthday celebration in Kengtawng, Shan State, Myanmar. [Source: Facebook.com/khunsarmlawfamily kengtawng].

Both celebrations (in Chiang Mai and Kengtawng), however, have no relationship with Sai Jerng Harn's movement in Kehsi. The migrant Shans/the Khun Sam Law Family went even further, by denouncing the pop-star for purporting to be a reincarnation of Khun Sam Law. The Khun Sam Law Family's statement of April 26, 2014 states: "the pop-star Sai Jerng Harn not only distorted the 'legendary history' but possessed no characteristics of Khun Sam Law and no legitimacy to the claim."<sup>24</sup> This Family attempts to keep the legend intact, while claiming direct descent, the lineage in which outsiders are characterized as unacceptable. At the 2014 celebrations in Chiang Mai, Sai Leng Wan<sup>25</sup> said that "...it has been five consecutive years already that we have been celebrating Shan Valentine's Day, which falls one month after the global celebration."

Poi Sanglong (novice ordination), Poi Khao-wa (rain retreat), Poi Awk-wa (end of Buddhist Lent) and Poi Kathin (robe offering) are some of the annual festivals held by Shan communities in Chiang Mai. The Shan Valentine's Day celebration,

---

<sup>24</sup> Khun Sam Law Family of Kengtawng released a statement No: 100 on 26/04/2014.

<sup>25</sup> The Secretary, Khun Sam Law Family, Shan Valentine's Day organizer in Chiang Mai.

however, is a new event, unique for its association with the romantic notion vested in Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim literature. This celebration is known in Shan as “Wan Tanghak Tai” or “Wan Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim”, a Shan version of Valentine’s Day. Although membership is open to new entrants, the communities are largely native of Kengtawng and self-proclaimed descendants of “the Khun Sam Law Family of Kengtawng”.<sup>26</sup> This migrant Shan community can also be analyzed through the lens of “imagined communities”, Benedict Anderson (2006)’s analysis on the origin and spread of nationalism.<sup>27</sup> The annual Shan Valentine’s Day celebration in Chiang Mai or somewhere in Shan State, therefore, is “reimagined” and the legend’s lineage as “Khun Sam Law Family of Kengtawng” is socially constructed. Today, as the notion spreads, the celebration reaches beyond Chiang Mai and Kengtawng. For instance, at That Loi Yuan in Tachileik, Shan communities held Valentine’s Day festivities in 2012-2014 to commemorate Khun Sam Law.

## Theoretical explanations

### *Nature of Khun Sam Law movement*

Having introduced the legend and described the research context and methodology of the Khun Sam Law movements, leaderships, followers and people concerned, now this section examines how the nature of the movement can be understood through the lens of some well-established concepts discussed by scholars and researchers. I first examine the ‘revitalization movement’, the concept proposed by Anthony Wallace for the interpretation of new religious and cultural movements in the US. Wallace proposes that: “A ‘revitalization movement’ is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture. Revitalization is thus, from a cultural standpoint, a special kind of culture change phenomenon: the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it, as a system (whether accurately or not); they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well as, in some cases, new traits” (Wallace, 1956: 265).

---

<sup>26</sup> Leng Hsai Fah’s documentary on Khun Sam Law. <<https://www.facebook.com/KhunSarmLawFamily>>. Accessed: March 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson 2006. Anderson is the author of a landmark study of self-identity and imagined communities.



In Myanmar, new religious movements – millenarian movements, charismatic monks, spiritual leaders and religious cults – do surface from time to time. Cornelia Kammerer, whose studies focus on spirit cults and Buddhist practices in Cambodia, comments that “spirit cults are common throughout Southeast Asia, cutting across ethnic, religious, and political lines and referring to a wide variety of spirits – from ancestors to the spirit owners of animals and natural phenomenon” (Kammerer, 2003). Among the more well-known charismatic monks to have emerged in the last few decades in Burma are Tharmanya, Kunlong and Pho Win Taung, while the Mobyar Gaing<sup>28</sup> is just one example of millenarian movement. In recent years, shortly after Thein Sein assumed power in 2011, a new type of Buddhist movement gained popularity: the “969 Movement”, led by the ultra-nationalist monk U Wirathu.<sup>29</sup> In 2003, following an anti-Muslim sermon, U Wirathu was sentenced to 25 years in jail but was released in 2010 as part of an amnesty, together with numerous other political prisoners.

Ronald Hutton notes that there are four separate definitions for “shamanism” or “shaman”. The first definition refers to “anybody who contacts a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness.” The second definition limits the term to those who contact a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness at the behest of others. The third definition attempts to distinguish shamans from other magico-

---

<sup>28</sup> Mobyar Gaing (Blue Sky Sect) is a contemporary Buddhist sect, started in 1983 by a monk who claimed to be a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be). Members propagated the importance of the present moment in the teaching of *Pyitsupan Kammavada Buddhathatha* (present-karma Buddhism) and openly denounced everything to do with mainstream Theravada teaching; the Vinaya, the Abhidhamma, the teaching of Middle Way, etc. Hiroko Kawanami (2014). Mòpyar Gaing and Anti-Theravada Movement in Contemporary Myanmar <<http://www.iseas-bsc2014.sg/religion-and-politics-contemporary-myanmar-burma>>. Accessed: July 2014.

<sup>29</sup> The 969 Movement is not a “millenarian movement”; U Wirathu, its leader, is regarded as a radical and ultra-nationalist monk in reports by various writers. In its July 01, 2013 issue, *The Time* magazine named Wirathu as “The Face of Buddhist Terror”, a “notorious chauvinist” for whom Buddhism equates with a narrow nationalism. According to others, the movement has current government backing. (Kate Hodal, April 28, 2013. “Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma”, *The Guardian*.) Since the government reforms of 2011, he has been active on social media, posting sermons and seeking to draft a law to curb interfaith marriages in Myanmar. <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21582321-fuelled-dangerous-brew-faith-ethnicity-and-politics-tit-tat-conflict-escalating>.

religious<sup>30</sup> specialists who are believed to contact spirits, such as mediums,<sup>31</sup> witch doctors,<sup>32</sup> spiritual healers or even prophets, by claiming that they undertake some particular technique not used by the others. Problematically, scholars advocating the third view have failed to agree on what the defining technique should be. The fourth definition uses “shamanism” to refer to the indigenous religions of Siberia and neighboring parts of Asia (Hutton, 2001: vii–viii).

On the basis of the above definitions, Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn may be termed as something more than shamans. They may incorporate their practice with *Shweyingyaw* exorcism, but still adhere to Buddhist principles and religious practices in their daily routines. I contend that Wallace’s ‘revitalization movement’ bears a close alignment to this research discussion, since both Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn believe that the current situation in Shan State is unsatisfactory. It closely matches the Buddhist term *dukkha*, which can be rendered as suffering, anxiety or stress.

Nevertheless, the theories discussed so far do not address the phenomena of the Shan Buddhist movement, but rather its hybrid mix. This paper attempts to show that this particular type of Shan Buddhist movement does not resemble any of the movements discussed earlier, including shamanism, although they incorporate some of their respective elements. It is a mixture of Buddhism, as they built up their idea around *mettā* and *karunā*. It has an element of millenarianism, due to their allegiance to a bodhisattva-like *alawng*.<sup>33</sup> It also bears facets of shamanism due to the *Shweyingyaw* practices. Moreover, an inherent idea of the movement appears to recall the nostalgic notion of the Shan Kingdom. Their practices are a blend of more

---

<sup>30</sup> Magico-religious beliefs allow followers to use elements of magic to enable divine intervention in human affairs. Many world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Shamanism, offer examples of magico-religious beliefs. For example: asking a god to improve human health, ward off a threat or avoid a natural disaster.

<[http://www.ehow.com/info\\_8355592\\_magicoreligious-beliefs.html](http://www.ehow.com/info_8355592_magicoreligious-beliefs.html)>. Accessed: November 24, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Medium is the practice of certain people - to purportedly mediate communication between spirits of the dead and living human beings. Gilmore, Mernie (October 31, 2005). “A spiritual connection”. *The Express* (London). The medium has the role of an intermediary between the world of the living and the world of spirit. Mediums claim that they can listen to and relay messages from spirits, or that they can allow a spirit to control their body and speak through it directly or by using automatic writing or drawing (Carroll, Bret E. (1997). *Spiritualism in Antebellum America. (Religion in North America.)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 248).

<sup>32</sup> The Shan’s term for ‘witch doctors’ is *Sra Maw Pheu* or *Pu Maw Pheu*; they were emphatically not witches (pheu) themselves, but rather people who had remedies to protect others against witchcraft.

<sup>33</sup> The Shan usage “*alawng*” which derives from the Burmese “*alaung*” means “he who is destined to become an enlightened one or a super-human being”, or, in other words, a Buddha or a universal monarch.

than one particular entity. The following section discusses whether the Khun Sam Law movement can best be understood in terms of a ‘blended mix’.

### *Hybridity/Hybridization*

The term ‘hybridity’ or ‘hybridization’ has been used and interpreted since the early twentieth century by various academic disciplines, particularly sociology, anthropology and history (Ackermann, 2012: 7). In the context of this paper, it defines the nature of the Khun Sam Law movement as a mixture of ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’. If “hybridity” represents something with ‘impurity’, then the Khun Sam Law movement could be classed as a kind of religious movement containing some elements of ‘impurity’, which incorporates elements of practice such as *Shweyingyaw*, shamanism, some Buddhist concepts and principles, re-imagination of legend and local beliefs. This phenomenon is also known as religious syncretism, where a particular movement of thought is incorporated into one or more belief system. Although the two terms — syncretism and hybridity — connote a similar meaning, i.e. the blending of various elements into a system, hybridity may help to explain the merging of ‘purity-impurity’ characteristics. The Shan *sangha* are believed to practice a ‘pure’ form of Theravada Buddhism, within the Myanmar State. Thus, the SSSC represents a form of purity that follows authentic Shan Theravada Buddhist tradition. Generally, Buddhist laymen and monks are proud of the land that has retained an authentic and pure form of Buddhism. This clearly shows the power-relations between a new Shan Buddhist movement and the existing Shan State *sangha*. The hybrid nature of the Khun Sam Law movement is unacceptable for the SSSC and to some Shan Buddhists as well, which see it as a mere movement that distorts Buddhist teachings with dubious fundraising practices. Taking hybridity as a metaphor for impurity, the Khun Sam Law movement can be analyzed to deconstruct asymmetric power relations (Stockhammer, 2012: 2) that result from SSSC assumptions of its ‘religious purity’. Khun Sam Law followers were marginal in comparison with the majority of Shan Buddhists. However, they can still pose a challenge to the SSSC in the course of time.

### *Reimagining nostalgic legendary: how people reinvent the past*

This section shows how people reimagine and reinvent things of the past to recreate the present through literature, history and legends. The retelling of legend and history can compensate for the scarce documentation on the existence of the former Shan Kingdom.

In his introduction to *Reimagining History in Anglo-Norman Prose Chronicles*, John Spence writes: “... because of the close relationship between romance and history in late medieval England, legendary and romance material provided a

key to reinvent the past, whether the source was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, about Havelok, or legends around the lawlessness of Fouke le Fitz Waryn (Spence, 2013: 23). Numerous writers (Aung Tun, 2008; Hsen, 2012; Jaiyen, 1999) glorify the greatness of Tai people and their kingdom in the past, when they were secure and more integrated. Shan history tells the greatness of past Tai communities, their empire-building and founding cities were well respected. The last known powerful Shan king was *Hso Han Pha* (r. 1526-1542),<sup>34</sup> known as *Tho Han Bwa* in Burmese, whom local historians depict as a murderer and anti-Buddhism (Ba Than, 1994:69-70), while Western writers who follow Burmese sources also voice the same tone (Bischoff, 1995: 22; Harvey, 1925: 107-8; Phayre, 1883: 99).

When Hso Han Pha ruled Ava from early- to mid-16th century, he was said to have murdered Burmese monks in their hundreds. However, some sources claim that this was in retaliation to a conspiracy allegedly enacted by the monks against his rule, aided by Burmese political rivals (ministers). They wanted to dethrone Hso Han Pha because he harbored plans to invade Taung-oo and Prome (present-day *Pyay*), the only surviving small Burmese kingdoms (Hsen, 2012: 238). However, this particular reason has always been omitted in numerous historical writings. In 1543, the year after the end of Hso Han Pha's rule, a group of Burmese ministers at the court of Ava, led by Mingyi Yannaung, succeeded in murdering Hso Han Pha, the last known Shan influential figure in Burmese history. Nevertheless, the Shans still dream that they must revitalize their glory of the past and rebuild their homeland. Four centuries later, imagination and memory are still woven into everyday life.

With their kingdom gone in the 16th-century CE, the Shans were weakened and fragmented. Gradually, a smaller principedom of 33 states emerged, most of which paid tribute to the Burmese king. W.W. Cochrane writes: "... a prince of Mao<sup>35</sup> was the only Shan that ever united these squabbling states into one solid kingdom" (Cochrane, 1915: 46). At the dawn of Burma's nation-state building, which coincided with the end of British colonial rule in 1948, the Shan ruling princes were forced to give up their hereditary privileges to join the Union of Burma, marking the end of Shan era in Burma history. The Shans perceive their present status as vulnerable and fragmented. They have suffered fragmentation before, following the fall of Hso Han Pha, but the era of Burma nation-state building was an additional source of disintegration. Currently in Myanmar, there are two Shan political parties to contest

---

<sup>34</sup> Other sources quote 1527 as the first year of Tho Han Bwa's reign.

<sup>35</sup> "A prince of Mao" refers to Hso Khanpha (1291-1364), the great grandfather of Hso Han Pha (classical name: 'Sirihamsva'), known in Burmese history as Tho Han Bwa.

the general elections scheduled for November 2015. As the election date draws nearer, anxiety among Shan communities looms large (Jaiyen, 2015), wondering how their individual vote might impact their future.

Similar to Shan Valentine's Day celebrations, reincarnation and claim of lineage continuity, instances of reimagined and reinvented legends also exist in European lore. Spence (2013), for instance, examines legendary history, and romantic literature translated or adapted from earlier works, to show how these Anglo-Norman prose authors manipulated their sources by adding, omitting or even reshaping material in order to reinvent the past for national, religious, local, or personal ends. Likewise, Thai movies of recent decades have sought to reinvent historical works of the past, especially from the Ayutthaya period (1351 to 1767) to *stimulate Thainess* or nationalism after its downfall in 1767 at the hands of Burmese troops. For instance, the legends of Suriyothai,<sup>36</sup> Bang Rajan,<sup>37</sup> Kankluay,<sup>38</sup> and the legend of King Naresuan<sup>39</sup> are some of the examples re-imagined to bolster national pride but also with clear political ends in sight.

#### *Shan identities and Shan Buddhism*

Another legendary belief in Buddhist history is the celebration of Shan *Poi Sanglong*. This is a novice ordination, a ceremonial ritual re-enactment, representing a combination of two events in the life of a Buddhist devotee. First, the young boy dresses up in princely costumes and rides a horse or, in modern times, rides on the

---

<sup>36</sup> The Legend of Suriyothai is a 2001 Thai film directed by Chatrichalerm Yukol, portrays the life of a female historical figure, who is also regarded by Thai people as the "great feminist", Queen Suriyothai. She is officially known as Somdet Phra Sri Suriyothai (Thai: สมเด็จพระศรีสุริโยทัย), a royal Queen consort during the 16th century Ayutthaya period. In the film, she leads her battle elephant to face the Burmese army and sacrifices herself to save the life of King Maha Chakkraphat and his kingdom in a battle during the Burmese-Siamese War of 1548.

<sup>37</sup> Bang Rajan (Thai: บางระจัน) is a Thai historical drama film screened in 2000, depicting the battles of the Siamese village of Bang Rajan against the Burmese invaders in 1765 (Wyatt, 1984:136), as remembered in popular Thai culture. Cross-checking the story with the events reported by the Burmese sources indicates that the purported events at Bang Rajan are likely a merger of at least two independent events that took place in the war (Phayre, 1883:188-9).

<sup>38</sup> Kankluay (Thai: ก้านกล้วย) is a 2006 Thai computer-animated feature film set during Ayutthaya-era Siam about an elephant who wanders away from his mother and eventually becomes the war elephant for King Naresuan. It is based on "Chao Praya Prab Hongsawadee" by Ariya Jintapanichkarn. Its sequel, Kankluay-2, is about Kankluay's two elephant cubs, another attack by the Hongsawadi (Burmese), and struggling whether to live with his wife or fight the Burmese.

<sup>39</sup> *The Legend of King Naresuan* (Thai: ตำนานสมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราช) is a Thai biographical historical drama film about King Naresuan the Great, who ruled Siam from 1590 until his death in 1605.

shoulders of a male adult. The ceremony is intended to portray Prince Siddhartha's renunciation, when he left his father's palace and its riches, for a life of material privations. On leaving the palace, Prince Siddhartha was said to be accompanied by Kanna, his charioteer, and four *devas* lifting the four legs of the royal horse.

Secondly, ordaining a seven-year-old boy, or slightly older, bears a parallel with the life of Prince Rahula, the Buddha's only son, born just before Prince Siddhartha renounced the material world. Prince Rahula was also ordained as a seven-year old novice in accordance with the *samanera* ceremony. Nowadays, the Poi Sanglong ceremony is celebrated as lavishly as financial circumstances allow. It symbolically becomes part and parcel of Shan people's life and synonymous with Shan identity: "to be Shans is to be Buddhist". Although this celebration is a modern phenomenon of Shan Buddhists, it embodies meaning not only for the people concerned but for Buddhism and society as well. Nancy Eberhardt (2009: 54) has documented the Mae Hong Son migrant Shans when they experienced significant changes in recent years:

... they have encouraged a certain degree of self-consciousness and a heightened concern with 'authenticity' and 'origins', a process that tends to highlight the potentially positive role of the migrants in local efforts to recover and 'remember' Shan customs and identity, which are now perceived to be under threat of loss.

This becomes clearer when we learn what Khun Sam Law Family of Kengtawng contemplate about the legend and historical figure of Khun Sam Law, when Sai Leng Wan, the leader and organizer of Shan Valentine's Day, states the purpose of his organization and celebration:

1. To have the rights to protect the historical figure of Khun Sam Law and its lineage.
2. To recognize the third of the third lunar month (*Luen sam mai 3 kham*), Shan Valentine's Day (*Wan Tang Hak Tai*).<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> At the International Symposium on Dai-Thai Studies held at Jinghong, Sipsongpanna in 2006, Prakong Nimmanheminda, a Thai scholar suggested that the Shans may have Valentine's Day on the 3rd day of the 3rd lunar month in Shan calendar and that it is not necessary to follow international celebration, the 14th of February. Since then, the Shans have begun to celebrate the festivities on that day. According to the legend, the 3rd day of the 3rd lunar month was the day that the couple ended their young lives. Panglong. *Pi-nong-tai jat-wan-tang-hak-tai khuk-thup-sam-law-oo-peim* ("Shan migrants celebrate the commemorations of Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim and Shan Valentine's Day"). <[www.shan.panglong.org/news/culture/3033-2013-02-13-11-07-11.html](http://www.shan.panglong.org/news/culture/3033-2013-02-13-11-07-11.html)>. Accessed: February 2014.

3. To reaffirm that the Shans have a unique history, culture and nation.<sup>41</sup>

Notions of Shan glory in the past — history, legend, literature — kingdom and nation are remembered and reaffirmed Shan identities. In this process, the Shans can once again rise up and reinvent themselves for recognition. A few Shan elders, historians and scholars have at times suggested that the Shan celebration of Valentine's Day should highlight the fact that people around the world are in need of love, kindness and compassion, and should abandon hatred, animosity, envy or ill thoughts toward others.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the emergence of modern Khun Sam Law as a separate new Shan movements and their underlying factors. The success of the Movement, led by a Buddhist monk and a Shan pop-star, who claims to be a reincarnation, can be explained by the movement revolving around Khun Sam Law, a legendary figure. Some of the impetus recorded in early 2014 appears to have diminished, somewhat, but the movement is still active, on a slightly reduced scale, in its domain region where Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn exert the most influence. Although the message propagated by Sao Hsintham, the monk, does not necessarily deviate from mainstream Theravada practices, through the lens of my research, I have concluded that this Movement does not fully adhere to the commonly-accepted orthodox doctrine, and may be sending a strong message to the unitary form of the state's orthodox ideology.

Based on the same popular literature, the legitimacy of Khun Sam Law lineage and the promotion of the modern-day notion of Shan Valentine's Day are promoted, in particular, by a group of Shan migrants from Kengtawng. But this study found that there was a narrow connection between the two movements. This self-proclaimed migrant Shan group, known as *Khur Hern Khun Sarm Law Kengtawng* (Khun Sam Law Family of Kengtawng), may have legitimate claims, for they have

---

<sup>41</sup> For a recent scholarly paper on the Shan, see Aung Tun (2014), *The Shan in Myanmar: Their Culture and Traditions*, where the author deals with the division of Shan groups in Myanmar, their administrative system of Saohpa, marriage, divorce, funeral customs, tattooing and taboos.

<sup>42</sup> Mahamong Mongzse. (2014). "Wan Oo Peim-Sam Law" (Oo Peim-Sam Law Day). Shan Herald Agency for News. <[www.shan.panglong.org/features/3665-2014-02-12-12-40-41.html](http://www.shan.panglong.org/features/3665-2014-02-12-12-40-41.html)>. Accessed: October 2014.

descended from an unbroken lineage of Khun Sam Law. This movement has reinvented this lineage to claim the right for the protection of Khun Sam Law lineage and to reaffirm a unified Shan identity.

Presently, both movements seem to be in cohesion when they claim the re-establishment of palaces for Khun Sam Law in Kehsi at Hawan village; and at the same time, natives of Kengtawng re-construct the palaces at Wan Parsar in Central Shan State. These show that a 'nation' is reimagined, culturally revitalized and the Shan identities are reaffirmed through the glory of the past. Although relying on the Khun Sam Law–Nang Oo Peim legend, the movements have transformed themselves to better serve its aims. The legend is concerned with romantic love, but in contrast, both movements recast and reimagine this idea transforming and melting it into the Buddhist concept of “loving-kindness” (*mettā*). By doing so, it is able to stress the importance of treating one another with “friendship”, “equality”, “justice” and “humanity”, thus promoting the creation of a society which lives according to Buddhist principles. However, in other aspects, the Movement led by the monk and pop-star seems to depart from the established doctrines of Buddhism. But they beg to differ for all the above-mentioned Buddhist basic concepts to be working, and to be able to dispel the suffering Shan people encounter in their daily lives, where there is a need to resort to other “worldly” powers, notably the *alawng*. This corroborates the notion that this Buddhist movement aims at reinstating the golden days of the Shan past kingdom, where the Shan can rule their own country.

The revitalized ideology thus has religious and political aspects and it is therefore likely to face the opposition of religious and political prejudices. At the time of writing this article, the movement led by Sai Jerng Harn was in decline, while the Khun Sam Law Family movement received a wider attention. The Shan *angha's* strong opposition to the former movement may have contributed to its decline, while local political authorities had little or no share. The absence of any intervention from the authorities may be related to the relatively small size of the movement, but possibly due to the perception that it is not involved in politics nor does it have a connection with any particular armed resistance group. The authorities do not view this movement as an immediate threat and appear confident in their belief that the majority of the Shan *sangha* oppose the pop-star's ideology.

In terms of religious movement, I have argued that the Khun Sam Law phenomenon led by Sao Hsintham and Sai Jerng Harn is hybrid in nature. On the other hand, the movement attempts to deconstruct the asymmetric power relations that result from SSSC norms of its “religious purity”. The majority of the Shan *sangha* have failed to embrace their ideology, believing that the movement is merely distorting the teachings of the Buddha, thus damaging the Buddha-*sasana* as a whole.



Nevertheless, the monk and pop-star's attempts may embody symbolic action rather than 'manifestation'. In this sense, they may have tried to convince people in a language familiar to them, with only partial success, witness the SSSC voicing its concerns about possible infringements to the Buddha's message.

## References

- Ackermann, Andreas. (2012). Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism. In Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Ed.), *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach* (pp. 5-25). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Anderson, Benedict. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed.). London & New York: Verso (first published by Verso in 1983).
- Aung Tun, Sai. (2008). *History of Shan State: From Its Origins to 1962*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Aung Tun, Sai. (2014). The Shan in Myanmar: Their culture and traditions. *Myanmar Studies Journal*, 3, 17-43.
- Ba Than, U. (1994). *Burmese Chronicle* (in Burmese) (7th ed.). Rangoon: News & Media Services, Department of Information.
- Bischoff, Roger. (1995). *Buddhism in Myanmar—A Short History*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Boellstorff, Tom. (2012). Rethinking Digital Anthropology. In Heather A. Horst & Daniel Miller (Eds.), *Digital Anthropology* (pp. 39-60). London and New York: Berg.
- Cochrane, W. W. (1915). *The Shans*. Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing.
- Cohen, Paul T. (2000). A Buddha Kingdom in the Golden Triangle: Buddhist Revivalism and the Charismatic Monk Khruba Bunchum. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 11(2), 141-154.
- Cohen, Paul T. (2001). Buddhism Unshackled: The Yuan 'Holy Man' Tradition and the Nation-State in the Tai World. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32(2), 227-247.
- Dove, Michael R., Jonsson, Hjorleifur, & Aung-Thwin, Michael. (2011). A non-State Approach, in Debate — The Art of not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia by James C. Scott. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 167(1), 95-99.  
<http://www.i1.umich.edu/UMICH/cseas/Academics/Conferences/Debatewith-jamesscott.pdf>

- Eberhardt, Nancy. (2009). Rite of Passage or Ethnic Festival? Shan Buddhist Novice Ordinations in Northern Thailand. *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 10(1), 51-63. doi: 10.1080/14639940902968913
- Foundation, MAP. (2015). *RegularRights: A Study on the Impact of Regularization of Migrant Workers from Myanmar (Burma) in Thailand (Second ed.)*. Chiang Mai.
- Harvey, G. E. (1925). *History of Burma*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service.
- Hsen, Khur. (2012). *The Origin of Tai Race and History of Shan State (in Shan)*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Yangon: Mawk Kusoi Leng.
- Hutton, Ronald. (2001). *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*. London and New York: Hambledon.
- Jaiyen, Khunsai. (1999). Surkhanfah. Chiang Mai: Shan Culture and Education Central Committee (SCEC).
- Jaiyen, Khunsai. (2015, Saturday, 14 March 2015). Pang-leuk-tang 2015 — Hso-sawng-tou te-yu-neu-tham-lue-kan-jeung-hue? (2015 Election: How 2 tigers share a cave?), Feature. *Shan Herald Agency for News*.
- Kammerer, Cornelia Ann. (2003). Spirit cults among Akha highlanders of northern Thailand. In Nicola Tannenbaum & C.A. Kammerer, *Founders' cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity*. New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asian Studies.
- Keyes, Charles F. (1977). Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 36, 238-302.
- Phayre, Lieut-General Sir Arther P. (1883). *History of Burma: Including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim and Arakan - From the Earliest Time to the End of the First War with British India*. London: Susil Gupta.
- Scott, James C. (2010). *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Spence, John. (2013). *Reimagining History in Anglo-Norman Prose Chronicles*. York: York Medieval Press.
- Stockhammer, Philipp W. (2012). Questioning Hybridity. In Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer, *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Whitehead, Neil L., & Wesch, Michael. (2012). Introduction: Human No More. In Neil L. Whitehead & Michael Wesch (Eds.), *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Wyatt, David K. (1984). *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.