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“THE MOUNTAIN OWNER HAS COME”

Religious Assemblage across the Thailand-Myanmar Border

KWANCHEWAN BUADAENG

Introduction

In January 2012, the Karen charismatic monk U Tuzana (also known as Myaing Gyi Ngu Hsayadaw in Burmese, or Phue Khaw Taw in Karen), who is based in the Myaing Gyi Ngu or Khaw Taw Pu area of Karen State in Myanmar, initiated the construction of a pagoda and other religious monuments on top and around the base of Tamo Mountain, in Doi Tao District of Chiang Mai Province. The coming of Phue Khaw Taw created much excitement among the Karen people living in the hill villages in the area. Many of them had been followers of the late Khuba Khao Pi (1889–1977) and Khuba Wong (1913–2000), the charismatic northern Thai monks whose monasteries—which became the centers of their activities—were in Li District of Lamphun Province. Khuba Khao Pi had stayed for twenty years at Wat Phra Buddhabat Tamo (the monastery at the Temple of the Buddha’s Footprint at Tamo), at the foot of Tamo Mountain, before he moved to Wat Phra Buddhabat Pha Nam in Li District. The pagoda was successfully built in a month, during which thousands of Karen people came daily to labor, carrying sand, cement, and stone from the foot to the top of the steep, high mountain. The excitement was due not only to the coming of Phue Khaw Taw, but because his coming was in accordance with the prophecy given by the late *khubas*. The late *khubas*’ words, “The mountain has an owner and one day he will come to build a pagoda on its top,” are often referred to by Karen lay leaders.

"But how can you be sure," I asked some followers, "that it was Phue Khaw Taw that the *khubas* were speaking of?"

A lay leader replied, "There is a sign, I am told. Only in the last few years has Tamo Mountain's cliff been standing upright; the cliff always leaned to one side until the coming of Phue Khaw Taw."

I used the term "*khuba* movement" in my study (Kwanchewan 1988) that focused on Khuba Khao Pi and his Karen followers who resided around Wat Phra Buddhahat Pha Nam in Li District. The term "movement" is used because Khuba Khao Pi had resisted the order of the mainstream sangha, the centralized state organization of monks. The name Khuba Khao Pi, literally "Revered White Teacher Pi," came from the fact that he was disrobed by the state and sangha authorities but continued his monkhood by wearing a white robe instead of a yellow one. He had his own religious community in the distinctive *khuba* tradition: regular meditation, extensive religious monument construction, and vegetarianism. In addition, Karen followers saw Khuba Khao Pi as Ariya Metteya, the fifth Buddha, who would lead them to utopia provided that they practiced vegetarianism, upheld moral precepts, and supported religious monument construction. After the death of Khuba Khao Pi the nature of the movement changed. Although Khuba Wong followed Khuba Khao Pi's religious tradition, his position and operation, unlike Khuba Khao Pi, were fully controlled by the centralized sangha. After the death of Khuba Wong some Karen followers actively started to search for another messiah. The arrival of Phue Khaw Taw to construct the pagoda on top of Tamo Mountain was interpreted by some Karen elders, followers of Khuba Khao Pi, as the coming of the messiah.

The assemblage of the Karen followers of the late *khuba* and the new messiah, however, cannot be viewed simply as the continuation of the *khuba* movement. Many different agencies were involved in the construction of the pagoda at Tamo Mountain, and they did not all share the same identity, direction, and goals. They connected with each other and converged in the construction activity but did not necessarily form a unified whole. Thus the concept of "assemblage" is more fitting in this case than the term "movement," as it stresses the multiplicity of the nature of the convergence, following DeLanda (2006, 253), who notes that "assemblages are not Hegelian totalities in which the parts are mutually constituted and fused into a seamless whole. In an assemblage components have a certain

autonomy from the whole they compose, that is, they may be detached from it and plugged into another assemblage." This chapter also follows Escobar and Osterweil (2010, 191) in that assemblages are viewed as "wholes characterized by relations of exteriority; the whole cannot be explained by the properties of components but by the actual exercise of the components' capacities." In this case, the different components of the assemblage—the Karen followers, Phue Khaw Taw, the abbot of Tamo monastery, and the financiers—do not fuse into a seamless whole, but their interaction, nevertheless, increases one another's capacity. The description in these pages of each component stresses its different identity and operation, and its independence from the others. Connections are made via particular persons, while the sacred mountain provides the space for convergence. The conclusion of this chapter analyzes the realization of Karen capacity as a result of their joining in this assemblage.

Karen Followers of the Late Khubas

The Karen people who have followed and settled around Khuba Khao Pi's Pha Nam monastery are from the hill areas of Mae Sariang District in Mae Hong Son Province and from Hot and Omkoi Districts of Chiang Mai. Those who have followed and settled around Khuba Wong's Huai Tom monastery are from Mae Ramad and Tha Song Yang Districts of Tak Province, around the Thailand-Myanmar border. These are areas where both *khubas* traveled extensively to renovate or construct religious monuments. They also lived with and taught the Karen, who were the majority in the area, to adopt their Buddhist tradition. The *khubas* had a close relationship with local Karen leaders who transmitted the *khuba* tradition to their people and mobilized them for the projects of religious monument construction.

Another reason Karen followers from different areas attached to different *khubas* was their different perceptions of *kacha* (lord). *Khuba* in Karen understanding is *kacha*. So Khuba Khao Pi they called *kacha wa*, a Skaw Karen term meaning "white lord" (because of his white robe), and Khuba Wong they called *kacha pho*, or "little lord," when he was a novice, and later, when he was a well-known monk, they called him *kacha pha*

do (great lord). In daily usage, *kacha* is also used to mean "owner" (e.g., *ya kacha* means "it's mine"). Accordingly, in traditional Karen beliefs, "lord," a sacred being, is an owner of particular objects and places. For example, *thee kacha* is the "lord of the water," *kaw kacha* is the "lord of the land." The great lords are propitiated annually by villagers for their well-being. Therefore, the two *khubas* were also believed to be the owners of the areas in which they settled and built their sacred pagodas. Because of their greater power they suppressed the local spirits, the former owners of the water and the land, and became the new lords and owners.

When Karen learned that the *khuba* had come to build a pagoda and to stay in the hill areas around the Myanmar-Thailand border, not far from their villages, they willingly participated and contributed their labor to the building. Some had knowledge of Buddhism and merit-making from seeing the ruins of Buddhist monasteries in the area. For others, it was because their parents had joined Khuba Sriwichai in constructing the road to Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai city in the 1930s. After repeatedly joining the *khubas'* construction activities they understood more and more about their Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless, while they worshiped the *khubas*, they still also worshiped the spirits which resided in the area. After the *khubas* returned to their monasteries in Li District, some Karen people went to visit them so often that they thought they should relocate to be close to the *khubas'* monasteries. Those who decided to relocate also decided to give up spirit worship. The relocation of Karen people to Khuba Khao Pi's and Khuba Wong's monasteries took place in the 1970s.

In the case of Khuba Wong's followers, they said he suggested that they go to a monastery around Pa-an city, in Karen State in Myanmar, to get a sacred stone which they could use to protect themselves from evil spirits. They could soak the stone in water and drink the sacred water before they relocated to the *khuba's* location. Even when they were staying with the *khuba* they could drink the sacred water any time they felt threatened by evil spirits. Getting a sacred stone from Pa-an, which is on the Burmese side of the Salween, was described by one Karen religious leader as going back to their mother's side of the Salween (*mo thee*) to cut off their umbilical cord—the Karen people believe that the west side of the Salween River, which is in Myanmar, is their mother's side, while the east side, which is in Thailand, is their father's side (*pa thee*). Another

important piece of advice which Khuba Wong gave to the Karen who wanted to relocate around him was to be only vegetarian. This was to avoid evil spirits following and attacking. Spirits were accustomed to being fed with chicken and pork, so they would not trouble those who were vegetarian. Thus at least in the first few years, every Karen who settled at Huai Tom village around Khuba Wong's monastery was vegetarian. Similarly in Pha Nam, when Khuba Khao Pi was still alive, Karen followers living around his monastery were strictly vegetarian, devoted themselves to the *khuba's* construction projects, and regularly attended the *khuba's* ceremonies. After Khuba Khao Pi passed away in 1977, Karen followers in Pha Nam followed Khuba Wong and devoted themselves to Khuba Wong's religious activities. In the time since Khuba Wong passed away in 2000, however, Karen ascetic practices—especially vegetarianism—have declined, and this is increasingly noticeable.

Modernization and commercialization have now changed Karen people's way of life. In the beginning, the most common source of employment for people who had relocated to live near the *khuba* was construction work on the *khuba's* projects, without payment. But now people are busy with cash cropping, or making silver or weaving textiles for sale. The younger generations complete their formal education and find employment elsewhere, outside the villages. The typical reason given as to why they cannot continue to be vegetarian is that being vegetarian is inconvenient when working outside the village or visiting a hospital in town.

Some Karen people, however, belonging to the earlier generation that relocated to the *khubas'* sites and now in their seventies and eighties are strict in their religious practices and their vegetarianism (along with some of their descendants). More than that, they have actively searched for the new *kacha*, the next "lord" who will oversee the Karen people. In 2005, 2007, and 2009, around twelve male and female elders and religious leaders from both Pha Nam and Huai Tom¹ organized a trip to important monasteries in Myanmar, in the Karen State, including Alangthaya² in the town of Thaton, Swe Kabin in Pa-an, and Khaw Taw monastery, near the Salween River. Lung Ni,³ the lay leader from Pha Nam who initiated the trip to Myanmar, told me that on the first trip they briefly met Phue Khaw Taw, who hinted that he would come to build religious monuments on the Thai side of the border. According to Lung Ni, Phue Khaw Taw said that

Thai people had donated money for the construction of many religious monuments on the Burmese side, so it should be all right if he used Thai money for construction on the Thai side. In fact, he said, the two sides should be combined as one. Phue Khaw Taw also mentioned that he could visit to hoist the umbrella to the top of the great Sri Wiang Chai pagoda—almost finished—which was being constructed at Huai Tom.⁴ Before they left, Phue Khaw Taw gave Lung Ni and the team some medicine and instructed them to continue being vegetarian. On the second visit, Phue Khaw Taw was not around to meet them. On the last visit, Lung Ni said that Phue Khaw Taw was seriously ill but managed to ask them where they were from and how many of them had come.

I asked Lung Ni and other elders why they had faith in Phue Khaw Taw, and Lung Ni told me about his dream. Just one day after Khuba Khao Pi passed away, the *khuba* had come to him and told him that he would stay in Omkoi (Lung Ni's hometown) for seven days. After that he would go to Alangthaya, on the Burmese side of the Salween. When I asked if Phue Khaw Taw was the reincarnation of Khuba Khao Pi, Lung Ni said that it was not necessary for Khuba Khao Pi to be reborn as Phue Khaw Taw, but that the spirit of Khuba Khao Pi had been merged in Phue Khaw Taw. He referred to Phue Khaw Taw's own words that "Khuba Sriwichai, Khuba Khao Pi, and Khuba Wong are now in me. . . . Any of the previous *khubas*' unfinished construction projects will be continued by me." Lung Ni believed that the three *khubas* mentioned, and also Khuba Chaoraj,⁵ belonged to the same lineage: "They know the same things, and believe in the same things."

The prophecy of Khuba Khao Pi and Khuba Wong about the coming of the owner of Tamo Mountain is also often mentioned by Karen people who are now following Phue Khaw Taw. When asked who invited Phue Khaw Taw to come to Tamo, Lung Ni said, "Nobody. He comes on his own. He sees for himself that it is time for the mountain owner to come. It is not necessary to ask anyone." Another lay leader from Huai Tom also confirmed Khuba Khao Pi's words that when the Tamo cliff stands upright, its owner will come. He said that Khuba Wong, too, had confirmed Khuba Khao Pi's prophecy, adding that the mountain owner would come from the west. According to him, Khuba Wong explained that three charismatic monks who were in the same lineage were the late Alangthaya, Thammaya,

and Phue Khaw Taw. They belonged to the mother's side of the Salween, while Khuba Chai Langka (Khuba Sriwichai's teacher), Khuba Sriwichai, Khuba Khao Pi, and Khuba Wong belonged to the father's side.

Phue Khaw Taw and His Connections

Charismatic monks in Karen State in Myanmar are often popularly named after the places they have founded.⁶ Phue Khaw Taw (1949–) is called after his monastery at Khaw Taw area or Myaing Gyi Ngu, literally "Big Forest River Bend" in Burmese. This reflects the concept of *kacha* as the lord who "owns" the particular place. Phue Khaw Taw is widely recognized as the spiritual leader of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), set up in 1994, in the mutiny against the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the military wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), which has long fought the Burmese government. His biography has been written in Burmese and translated into English (Myaing Nan Swe 1999) to offset his controversial image and actions by emphasizing his meritorious actions and his aim, which is not political power but the prosperity of the Buddhist lands of antiquity. The DKBA central committee writes,

The Ministry of Myaing-Gye Ngu Sayadaw is not only for the betterment of the Kayin people but also for the improvement of the life of every individual. As he was prohibited to carry out his ministerial work, the Buddhist people who served in the KNU organization could not bear the injustice done to Sayadaw. As a result, they separated themselves from the KNU and formed the DKBA organization as a means of protection for the Buddhist people, the temple, pagodas, monasteries and other religious buildings. (Myaing Nan Swe 1999, 225)

The book describes Phue Khaw Taw's personal experiences, stressing his desire to devote himself to religion from a young age. He was ordained as a novice and received Buddhist education, but when family members fell ill he had to leave to help in the rice fields. He was later conscripted by the KNLA and then found the new goal of his life while traveling in the mountains and forests as a soldier. As the book describes,

he found many zedis, stupas, shrines and pagodas in the forests and mountains which were ravaged by time immemorial. On seeing these ruined zedis, stupas, shrines and pagodas Maung Than Sein [Phue Kaw Taw's civil name] was moved with piety and he determined to rebuild these religious edifices when the opportunities arose.

After completing his military service, Phue Khaw Taw was ordained as a monk when he was twenty years old. He then devoted himself to disciplined meditation in the mountains, from which he gained his charisma and his reputation for magical powers (Rozenberg 2010). Later he began building and renovating many stupas and religious monuments in the hills on the Thailand-Myanmar border, following his vow to rebuild the peace and prosperity of the Buddhist lands of antiquity. In the two decades from the beginning of the 1980s he had built or renovated more than seventy pagodas and forty ordination halls in Karen State (Rozenberg 2010, 135).⁷ His moral leadership was not new, as it had also existed in previous Karen charismatic leaders or prophets who had founded millenarian-like movements.⁸ As summarized by Gravers (2010), “U Thuzana is the answer to the Karen quest for a moral leader who places peace, well-being and future prosperity above politics. His support is based on Karen traditional leadership, nationalism and modern development, as well as traditional Buddhist moral leadership.”

In recent years Phue Khaw Taw has gone for medical treatment to a well-known hospital in Bangkok (Gravers 2010). I was told that many migrant Karen workers who had been following him since they were in Myanmar visited him at the hospital. Then the millionaire owner of a big agrobusiness company that employs migrant Karen workers learned about Phue Khaw Taw through his workers and invited Phue Khaw Taw to live in his grand religious park in Chonburi Province. Phue Khaw Taw has performed Buddhist and traditional Karen religious ceremonies for thousands of Burmese Karen laborers employed by the company.⁹ His projects, such as the construction of the pagoda on top of Tamo Mountain, have also been sponsored by the owner of this company, which has branches in many regions of Thailand.

The reason Phue Khaw Taw chose to build the pagoda on top of Tamo Mountain is explained by a close disciple of his, a monk who came from

Khaw Taw monastery in Myanmar. This disciple says that Phue Khaw Taw had thought of building a pagoda in this place twenty years before, but it had not eventuated. This is understandable, I think, because that was a difficult time when the DKBA, led by Phue Khaw Taw, had just split from the KNU and there was fighting between them and with the Burmese army. I believe that Phue Khaw Taw learned about Khuba Khao Pi and Tamo Mountain from Karen people who were frequently crossing the border and from monks who had been ordained at Huai Tom Temple. As mentioned earlier, the *khuba*'s followers had conducted a pilgrimage to important religious sites in Myanmar and had met Phue Khaw Taw for the first time in 2005. Another monk told me another reason: “Phue Khaw Taw has magic eyes. From the Khaw Taw area he had seen that Thailand would be flooded. So he had asked the deities to lessen the amount of water and vowed to construct the pagoda in return.”

Construction of the pagoda on top of Tamo Mountain was carried out by thousands of Karen people from many villages, including followers of Khuba Khao Pi and Khuba Wong living around the area. Around five hundred Karen people came each day to help, carrying heavy stone, sand, and cement up the narrow, winding trail to the top of the high mountain. I was also told that some Karen people who came to make merit with Khuba Khaw Taw revealed that they had seen him in a vision before coming to see him in reality. With the contribution of Karen labor and the donation of materials and food from many sources, the construction of the pagoda was finished within a month.

During the construction of the pagoda, Phue Khaw Taw stayed overnight at many places: the construction site, Phra Bat Tamo monastery, and the area of Phra Bat Huai Tom Pagoda. He left the area for Bangkok, for other places in Thailand, and for the border area from time to time. In October 2012, I met many Karen monks and novices from Myaing Gyi Ngu monastery in Karen State, Myanmar, who had continued living in the area.¹⁰ Although the pagoda was finished, there was still a lot to be done, including building a permanent road from the main road to the foothills of Tamo Mountain and then up to the pagoda. A monk who acted as Phue Khaw Taw's secretary told me that Phue Khaw Taw had just been there two days ago, but that it was always uncertain when he would be coming. Sometimes he phoned to let his people know that he would come, but

sometimes he just arrived and stayed for twenty minutes before leaving again. He mentioned that Phue Khaw Taw had said, "It is as if the car is my monastery."

Construction of the pagoda on Tamo Mountain was possible because of the participation of different agencies—in this case, at least four. These agencies neither knew each other well nor shared the same reasons for contributing to the construction of the pagoda. First were the former Karen followers of Khuba Khao Pi and Khuba Wong, as described above. They perceived Phue Khaw Taw to be the mountain owner who would lead the Karen to a prosperous utopian future, in accordance with the prophecy of the two late *khubas*. The second agency was Phue Khaw Taw himself and his monks and novices from Karen State, Myanmar. Around sixty to one hundred of these monks and novices worked permanently at the construction site, while local Karen came only on and off to help. A few of Phue Khaw Taw's monks had originally migrated from Karen State or had crossed the border with their parents when they were young. Of three monks who were known to be Khuba Khaw Taw's secretaries, one had been ordained at a monastery in Mae Sariang District of Mae Hong Son Province and another in Tha Song Yang District of Tak Province; the third was ordained at Wat Phra Bat Huai Tom. Some of them had Thai citizenship and could communicate in Thai. They thus worked as coordinators with local people and sometimes with the officials who came to investigate the legality of the construction. A few monks had experience in building and could thus act as supervisors of novices working on the construction site.

Construction of the pagoda on Tamo Mountain aroused the suspicion of local officials because it was taking place without official permission and was led by Burmese monks and novices who had entered Thailand without legal documents. National security officials and those from other related agencies, such as the police, district officers, and forestry authorities, came to investigate. The person who helped most in defending the construction work was the third agency in the assemblage, Phra M, the abbot of Wat Phra Bat Tamo. His ethnic and educational background, as well as his religious practices, all differed from those of the *khubas*, but he had faith in Khuba Wong and had actually been assigned as an abbot of the monastery founded by Khuba Khao Pi many decades earlier.

Phra M was born in 1955 in a middle-class family in Bangkok. He was influenced by his own brother, who was ordained as a Buddhist monk and was disciplined in his meditation practice. From the age of seventeen Phra M meditated, following in the footsteps of famous monks such as Luang Pho Ruesi Ling Dam (1916–92) and Luang Pho Cha (1918–92) and so on. He later met Khuba Wong when he went to central Thailand and joined a group organizing a *kathin* (robe offering) ceremony at Wat Phra Bat Huai Tom in 1979. In his biography on the temple's website (www.wattamor.com), he recounts how "the first time I met Luang Pho Khuba Wong, I felt very affectionate and respectful to him; we were like a father and son who had been parted from each other for a long, long time. . . . I believed that I had met a teacher who understood me." He also told me in an interview that he had been Khuba Wong's son for two past lives.

Although he was granted the position of squadron leader in the Royal Thai Air Force after he finished school in 1980, he always desired to become a monk. He was ordained in 1981 in Bangkok and later traveled to live with Khuba Wong. In 1982 he moved to become the abbot of Wat Phra Bat Tamo, which had been abandoned since Khuba Khao Pi had left in 1957. He explained that his desire to become a Buddhist monk had begun in his past lives. He could have been ordained then, but not until he was in his sixties. It was only in this life that he was able to be ordained as early as he had desired.

Phra M was actually the host for the construction of the pagoda because the mountain was in the vicinity of Phra Bat Tamo monastery. (As one Karen leader said, he was introduced to Phue Khaw Taw via an army general from Bangkok.) According to Phra M himself, the coming of Phue Khaw Taw was in accordance with Khuba Wong's prophecy that the owner, or lord, of Tamo Mountain would come to build a pagoda. He also praised Phue Khaw Taw for his ascetic practices of not receiving money and being vegetarian. He believed in Phue Khaw Taw's words that if the pagoda was not built, Bangkok would be flooded for eleven days continuously. So he acted as an intermediary between Phue Khaw Taw, Thai state officials, and also official sangha monks. He wrote a confidential letter to the officials concerned, informing them of why he had allowed Phue Khaw Taw to build the pagoda. He said that Thai officials should not offend Phue Khaw Taw because the monk also supported dam construction, which would

help in Thailand's development. Phra M continued, saying that should he be treated badly, the monk could recall 25,000 Karen laborers back to Myanmar, which would greatly affect Thai business.

The fourth agency enabling the construction of the pagoda was the financial support of business people. One Karen leader told me that the cost of constructing Tamo pagoda and the surrounding buildings was around 80 million baht. The estimate might not have been from real calculations, but it was not far from reality. Although most of the labor was free, the cost of materials (the iron structure, cement, bricks, etc.) was high. Besides that, the monks' and novices' daily living expenses were also high. Phue Khaw Taw would come regularly to pay for construction materials, food, and other expenses. And this was not his only project, but just one of many going on at the same time. Others were the construction of the pagoda's ordination hall, a ceremonial hall, and other buildings in Chiang Mai and in central Thailand. Besides these, construction projects were also being conducted on the Burmese side of the border, including road and bridge construction. His followers at the border referred to Phue Khaw Taw saying that because the money that had been used to build many projects in Myanmar was from Thailand, he had to also build religious monuments in Thailand, beginning with the Tamo pagoda.

One of the chief financial supporters was the owner of the agroindustry company that was one of the biggest exporters of frozen chicken from Thailand. The company had branches in many provinces of Thailand and also operated in the border area in Karen State, reportedly hiring thousands of Karen workers from Myanmar. Besides this, it had contracted around one hundred thousand farmers in many regions to produce crops and animals.¹¹ The owner of this company was known as a religious man. He invited Phue Khaw Taw to live on his estate, built in a grand religious park with unique buildings and religious statues from many traditions. The park is one important node in the movement of Phue Khaw Taw, who sometimes stays there in between his travels around the country. Phue Khaw Taw travels frequently. He has to come regularly to a hospital in Bangkok, and he is often invited to preach at factories employing Karen migrant laborers in provinces neighboring Bangkok. Besides these trips, Phue Khaw Taw travels extensively to oversee construction projects around northern Thailand, on both sides of the Thailand-Myanmar border, and elsewhere; he also

spends time at his monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu. He had a few new cars donated by business people. His drivers, interpreters, and other assistants were Karen with Thai identification cards, who were faithful to him and ready to drive and accompany him elsewhere in Thailand.

Linkages between Different Agencies in the Unstable Assemblage

As described above, each of the four different agencies—the Karen lay people, Phue Khaw Taw and his associates, Phra M, and the financial backers—had their own distinctive identity, experiences, and religious goals and practices. They converged not to form a synchronized organization but to exercise their individual capacities in the construction of the grand religious project, under the leadership of the revered monk. Relations among them were slight, for people in each agency did not necessarily know in detail about the backgrounds, desires, and objectives of the others. Their connections were more interpersonal: Phue Khaw Taw had linked up with the late *khuba's* Karen followers who had gone to see him a few times in Myanmar; the Thai millionaire had linked up with Phue Khaw Taw via his Karen migrant laborers; Phra M had linked up with Khuba Wong and his officials, who had introduced him to Phue Khaw Taw.

Besides these interpersonal connections, the sacred Tamo Mountain also played an important role as a central link with the different agencies. Like other mountains with unusual features (e.g., very high, very large, perfectly cone- or square-shaped, or difficult to access), Tamo Mountain was believed to be the abode of sacred beings. According to Swearer, Sommai, and Phaithoon (2004, 22),

the mountain as a topographic feature of a landscape inspires awe, respect, fear, curiosity, and reverence. Its height serves as a point of special orientation and the axial center of a cosmological worldview associated with kingship. Imagined as the abode of autochthonous, Brahmanical, and Buddhist deities, spirits, and sacred beings, the mountain's wilderness environment serves as a magnet for spiritual

virtuosi—shamans, ascetic monks, and hermits (*ruesi*)—as well as pilgrims who journey to the temples and monasteries located there.

Tamo Mountain is high, with a large rocky top clearly visible from the surrounding plain of Li and Doi Tao Districts. According to a myth told by Phue Khaw Taw's secretary and memorized by many other Karen followers, the mountain was long ago the abode of three hundred *yaksa*, demon-like beings. Like other tales of Buddha visiting sacred places,¹² when the Buddha arrived at the Tamo Mountain area, he challenged the three hundred demons to completely cover up his body. The demons could not, as the Buddha's body was too big to cover. So the demons believed in him and followed his instructions and became vegetarian, as otherwise they would have turned to stone. According to Khuba Wong (Phra Maha Nopadol 2009), the Tamo area was visited by four Buddhas who left their footprints, later visible in the area. The coming of Phue Khaw Taw to construct the pagoda to accommodate a Buddha relic helped to give credence to the myth of the Buddha's visit. The sacredness of Phue Khaw Taw, in turn, was also reinforced.

It is clear that the assemblage does have the effect of increasing the participants' capacities. In the case of the Karen followers of the late *khubas*, who are now in their seventies and eighties, hope is rekindled for a future utopia. Before the coming of Phue Khaw Taw they were frail and rarely wandered far from home. When Phue Khaw Taw, the mountain owner, came according to the prophecy, they regained their strength. They excitedly told me of their happiness on meeting the charismatic monk and of their great desire to gain merit, which gave them energy to climb the mountain while carrying heavy sand or stone, and to walk up and down once or more often each day, until the pagoda was finished. They would not have normally been able to expend that much energy.

Charismatic leaders who are able to build grand religious monuments on top of sacred mountains are also recognized as being highly meritorious people. They certainly possess greater power than the sacred beings who formerly inhabited the place. This is also reflected in the ritual that Phue Khaw Taw usually conducts when he begins building a pagoda. The ritual is conducted on the spot to propitiate the guardian spirits. Trays are prepared holding coconut and other offerings. The top of the pagoda is of utmost

importance, and the ritual of hoisting its umbrella is usually performed by a meritorious or revered person to add more sacredness to the pagoda and its surrounds.

By adding to this assemblage the support of wealthy Thai financiers, it is clear that Phue Khaw Taw has expanded his influence from beyond the Thailand-Myanmar border to the interior of Thailand, with more monasteries built in his name and with new networks of Karen followers.

However, this assemblage is not stable but always shifting. As summarized by Collier and Ong (2005, 12) in their study of global assemblage, "An assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake." As found in this assemblage, in the age of globalization many different agencies have been able to connect and converge to act together. Facilitated by high-tech communication and transportation, they are easily mobilized.

As has been explained, not all Karen followers of Khuba Wong and Khuba Khao Pi are convinced that Phue Khaw Taw is the real mountain owner and the proper person to build the sacred pagoda. These nonbelievers pay no attention to the late *khubas'* prophecy on the coming of the mountain owner. More than that, they question the background of Phue Khaw Taw as the spiritual leader of DKBA and also his hidden agenda in building the pagoda at Tamo Mountain. Nonbelievers from Huai Tom village say that Phue Khaw Taw might be fleeing from Myanmar, that his actions are suspicious in that he always travels to the Li District area very late at night, that he obtains a lot of money from there, and that monks and novices who build religious monuments might be soldiers in disguise.

The lay leader of the village cautioned that years ago many Karen were defrauded by a monk who claimed to be an incarnation of Khuba Chaoraj. The monk asked for a lot of money from Karen villagers, promising that they would receive ten times the amount of money donated in return; the villagers never got their money back. The village leader worries that Phue Kaw Taw might be like that monk. This leader tries to persuade Karen villagers to be loyal only to Khuba Wong or Khuba Khao Pi, whose bodies are still kept in Wat Phra Bat Huai Tom and Wat Pha Nam, respectively. He says, "Our own construction activity is not yet complete, but many Karen

people have gone to help Phue Khaw Taw's construction. This is not the right way to do things."

Those who believe in Phue Khaw Taw, on the other hand, are convinced that Phue Khaw Taw is the proper person because he is a strict vegetarian and devotes himself to the construction of religious monuments in the same tradition as Khuba Khao Pi and Khuba Wong. That Phue Khaw Taw is from Myanmar does not matter to this group. Some think that Phue Khaw Taw is creating an opportunity for them to make merit and they do not hesitate to take this opportunity. As one person explains,

He is actually Karen, the same as us. . . . I am interested in helping. . . . Making merit is for myself. . . . I am the owner of that merit. . . . I am satisfied with this. . . . I join the activity like my forefathers who helped Khuba Sriwichai build the road to Doi Suthep. . . . Villagers who do not believe in Phue Khaw Taw told me not to go, that he [Phue Khaw Taw] is a Burmese. . . . I said I don't care. . . . I am interested only in merit-making.

Conclusion

This chapter applies the concept of assemblage to understand the convergence of many different agencies in the construction of the pagoda on top of Tamo Mountain. The multiplicity of the assemblage is evident in the different goals and the different ethnic, educational, and occupational backgrounds of the agencies. Even within one agency, in fact, such as the Karen followers, there are differences in ideas and practices. Nevertheless, these disparate agencies are linked in interpersonal networks that converge on the Tamo Mountain, a sacred space with a sacred meaning and the memory of the visit of the Buddha, and the prophecy of Khuba Khao Pi and Khuba Wong regarding the mountain owner.

Furthermore, the interaction in the assemblage has increased the capacity of each agency. The amount of money required is high; seeing the Karen people donate their labor to construct the grand and elaborate projects inspires wealthy donors to give more. The Karen people's hopes for utopia are revived; at the same time, the resources and energy that they

invest in the construction work increases. The accomplishment of a grand project legitimizes the great, meritorious leader. The construction has actualized the power of the sacred mountain and turned the marginalized area into a grand utopian community.

This assemblage also reflects the change in the regional socioeconomic and political context, especially on the Thailand-Myanmar border. The increasing porosity of the border due to industrialization and commercialization has facilitated the movement of people, objects, and ideas. High-tech communication, media, and transportation have brought people from different areas together. Phue Khaw Taw, Karen migrant workers from the Karen State, and sponsoring businessmen from Bangkok all join the assemblage operating in the area of Doi Tao, a remote district of Chiang Mai. However, the assemblage is unstable and rife with various kinds of tension, most notably between Karen people who have different ideas and over legal issues surrounding the construction. So the assemblage is always in the process of becoming, and new assemblages may arise, following new connections and conditions.

NOTES

1. More or less the same people joined each trip.
2. Alangthaya monastery is also famous for the construction of many stupas in the area of Thaton, which is in Bago Region and not far from the Karen State capital, Pa-an. The charismatic monk who led the construction was from Pa-O background. Like the *khubas*, he was a vegetarian and practiced meditation regularly. He passed away many years ago and was succeeded by another monk.
3. A Pwo Karen in his sixties from Omkoi, interviewed on October 15, 2013.
4. The grand pagoda was built following the model of the great Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon. It took eleven years to finish, from 1995 to 2006.
5. Khuba Chaoraj was a charismatic Pwo monk from Pa-an, in Karen State, who had set up his monastery in a rural district of Lamphun Province in the 1960s and 1970s. He was recognized as being close to Khuba Khao Pi. He also drew large numbers of Karen followers from the surrounding hills to resettle around his monastery (see also Gravers 2012).
6. For instance, revered monks Thammaya Hsayadaw and Taungale Hsayadaw were named after the monasteries they constructed at the places called Thammaya and Taungale, respectively.
7. Rozenberg (2010) also includes Phue Khaw Taw in his study as one of eight contemporary revered monks widely worshiped in Myanmar.

8. Gravers (2004) writes about charismatic Karen leaders claiming to be vegan ascetics or *minlaung*, righteous rulers fighting with the British army from the eighteenth century until Burma (Myanmar) gained its independence. These leaders were present in the Yunzalin and Salween River areas, and led in the construction of pagodas to prepare the way for the coming of the future Buddha, Ariya Metteya.

9. Some religious ceremonies performed in the grand hall of the religious park, presided over by the company owner and attended by thousands of Karen migrant workers, are recorded in video form and distributed widely. In one video Phue Khaw Taw asked Karen workers to work harder and to be honest with the company.

10. Phue Khaw Taw's secretary told me that there were around seventy monks and novices constructing the road. Phue Khaw Taw had planned to bring more monks and novices to the construction site, but only this number had arrived. The monks and novices did not wish to come because the place was too hot compared with Myaing Gyi Ngu.

11. The company web page writes that it dominates the markets in Japan, England, Germany, China, the Netherlands and Belgium (see www.sahafarms.com/main.php).

12. The Buddha's journey throughout Lanna, the name of a former kingdom covering upper northern Thailand, is recorded in many chronicles and legendary histories. While visiting many great mountains he encountered autochthonous people and demon-like beings which inhabited those places. He showed his sacred power and taught the *dhmma* (Buddhist moral principles) to those demon beings and local peoples who were moved by his teachings and decided to convert to Buddhism. The legend of the Buddha's visit usually relates to the history of a stupa, built by a king or nobleman to accommodate a relic of the Buddha that was either given by the Buddha himself or came to the place by itself after the Buddha passed away.

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