

COMMUNAL VALUE AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION: A CASE STUDY OF HOT AIR BALLOON (MEE PONE PYAN) FESTIVAL IN TAUNGGYI, SOUTHERN SHAN STATE*

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Abstract

Hot Air Balloon Festival (Mee Pone Pyan festival) is celebrated in Taunggyi, Southern Shan State, as the state festival for not only local people but also Tourists. It was established as a religious ritual for paying homage to the Buddha. However, as times changed economic and development factors arose that led to the expansion of the ritual to that of a festival. The main themes were not changed for the festival, but the making and launching process of hot air balloons festival. Contributed greatly to communal value and social integration, previously the making and launching hot air balloon were represented as the highlight of cultural activity as well as the social activity of community. The aim of this study is to show how the communal values and social integration gradually developed and changed in the process of the celebrating hot air balloons festival. These items were explored by applying the qualitative research methodology especially using participant observation, key informant interview and focus group discussion. Data were analyzed and created by descriptive study design. By doing this research, it can be explored that although the festival encourage promotion of individual identity, it also has a positive impact of changing communal values and social integration.

Keywords: communal value, social integration, economic factor, identity

Introduction

By revealing Ethnography and cultural history, festivals are important events of human life today. They play a central significant role in human culture. They are celebrated in the form of religious, social, economic and cultural activities. All countries around the world possess their own, significant, symbolic and famous festivities. Myanmar also has very colorful and deep rooted festivities. Among the seven states of Myanmar, Shan State is the largest state. *Taunggyi* is the capital of the Shan State. It is situated in the southern part of the Shan State. People in *Taunggyi* Community also celebrate many attractive religious and cultural festivals: among them rowing boat festival (*Phaung Daw Oo* pagoda procession festival) and Hot Air Balloon (*Mee Pone Pyan*) festival are known as the most appealing festivals in this community. In addition, the result of the diversity and creativity of Hot Air Balloon, the festival becomes the most popular festival even in the whole of Myanmar and a beloved tradition which is embraced by locals and tourists alike. Attracting many people not only the local but people from other parts of Myanmar, as well as tourists from other corners of the world, the nature of this festival is altering and changing all the time. The celebration of hot air balloon illustrates spectacular display and skillful traditional craftsmanship. Year by year, the celebrating of hot air balloon festival has become the more famous as well as popular festival, so the more significant factors which are related to this festival will be presented and discussed.

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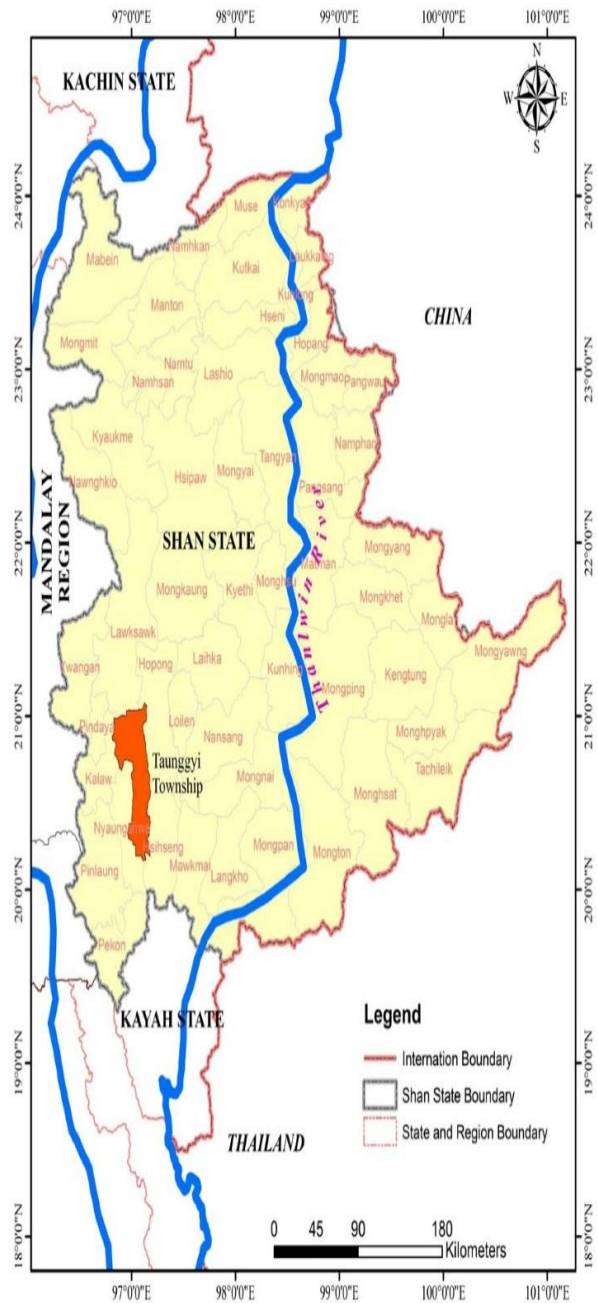
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Methodology

This study was conducted by using qualitative approaches. In this research, the type of study design is community-based descriptive design. Qualitative research can explore human experiences, their values, beliefs and practices. In the field study, the data were collected by Participant Observation, Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Discussion. Taking Photographs and recordings with video were performed for making Mee-Pone and fire works as well as launching the balloons. For the study area, the performance of Mee Phone Pyan festival held in Taunggyi. So, the selected area for this study was Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State. It is situated in southern Shan State and located (4712) feet above sea level. In this research, the study population was classified into three groups as competitors, referees and audience. Competitors were divided into two kinds. They were day-time competitors who create animal designs and night-time competitors who created Seinnapan and Mee Kyi. In addition to the competitors of 22 wards of Taunggyi, other organizations, business groups and the movement department participated to compete in the Taunggyi Mee Pone Pyan Festival. The aim of this study is to determine how communal value and social integration are gradually changed in the process of the celebrating the hot air balloon festival. By interviewing audiences, referees and competitors, it was explored how they change the communal value and social integration while making as well as launching of the hot balloons. By applying focus group discussion, it explored the confirmed data and also explored the values, belief, social meaning of the festival in their society. Focus Group Discussion was done in three groups and each had seven people who are depending on age.



Map (1) Map of Myanmar



Map (2) Map of Shan State

Literature Review

Pwe and Pwe Daw” are the Myanmar local terms for ritual, ceremony and festival (Pyinsa Rupa: Myanmar Airways International Flight magazine, April to June, 1996). “Pwe Daw” means a great grand festival. It is also a festival full of religious, social and ethnic import for the Myanmar People. (JARC- Yangon University, vol 1, No 1, 2004).

According to Karin Peters, the social integration process has three main meanings such as social networks, feeling of comfort and positing a relation between participats. (Karin Peters: P 45, 2011). Paul Rozin et all, communal values has two different ways. One of the way is

communal to social. It means that social interaction is related to communal values. And the rest is sharing values. (Article 177, volume 2, July 2011). Chibe Mararshi, mentioned that festival will see the social relationship between the participant groups as well as members of a group. (Chibe Mararshi, 2005). In this study, it can be explored that How will the word “Pwe Daw” relate with Taunggyi Tazaung Daing Festival? And the relation of communal value and social integration with Festival is explored.

Historical background of Hot Air Balloon festival

Hot Air Balloon festival is a very popular festival even in the whole Myanmar and beloved tradition which is embraced by locals and tourists alike. It is celebrated during November annually. The local people celebrate the festival at the full moon day of Tazaungmon (Myanmar month) as Tazaungdaing Pwe daw. In Myanmar Swe Soun Kyan Vol(5), it is explained that Tazaung(တန်ဆောင်) means light torch oil lamp and(mon) မှန်: means to brighten. According to Myanmar culture, the Tazaungdaing festival is held by Buddhist to commemorate the offering of lights to the Lord Buddha. Buddhist community believe that Tazaungdaing festival is to worship and offer to lord Buddha and launching the hot air balloon as a symbol of paying homage to the Sulamuni Pagoda. According to Ta Doe Taung, in Myanmar, the custom of offering lights with the fire balloon is also seen in some rural areas of Myanmar. However, they do not celebrate as the competition festival and are not famous like town Taunggyi.(Ta Doe Taung,1978)

The history of Taunggyi Mee-Pone-Pyan Pwe Daw established by the abbot sayadaw of Kone-Tha monastery. In 1941, the month of Tazaungmon, abbot sayadaw of Kone-Tha monastery read and calculated the horoscope and made calculations of the planets to carry out rituals to raise his fortune and to worship the Buddha. He believed that sending up fire balloons is one of the ways of paying respect to the Buddha like other Buddhism. At that time, the balloon was made by cotton and it was a big balloon. While they were launching the balloon, the balloon had reached the height of (400) feet, it burst into flames with a loud noise and fell to the ground into the garden with the sad failure.

They tried to send up the balloon for the second time. This time they made it with Shan traditional paper instead of cloth. It had a diameter of 24 feet. This time, launching balloon was successful and all the native people trusted that paper balloon was convenient for launching. So, after that all the balloons were made by traditional paper.

In 1946, a police officer U Shwe Ohn Maung organized all services for worship the Buddha by launching a balloon. The festival was held north east of the Police station. They called it as a police station *mee-wingaba* festival. They sent up a balloon which is only (10) feet in diameter for worshipping the Buddha. To make the more pleasant, beautiful and auspicious environment, they put up a bamboo mat which is painted by famous artists of Taunggyi. They painted the mural of the *Gawtama* Buddha descending from the celestial abode to the human world, attended by a host of other celestial beings. *Tazaungdaing Pwe* celebrated by the police station lasted four nights. From that time, the men and women of Taunggyi visited the *Myole Damayon* with lighted lotus lamps and lanterns in the evenings. They hung colorful lanterns on pineapple plants, trees, branches and bamboo tree as a token of offering lights. Although it just started as a simple balloon in the beginning. Later, they added strings or rings of lanterns to it. They also shot up fireworks. In those days, the various townships competed with each other just

for fun. There was no such thing as giving marks or prizes. Later it became more competitive and arguments arose as whose balloon was better. Thus it reached a stage when they needed a board of elders to decide the competition.

In 1952-53 the hot air balloon competition committee was officially formed. Sub-committees were also formed to draw up rules and regulations such as giving marks and rules to keep and obey. It became more systematic. From this event, the hot air Balloon worship festival was established and gradually became more grand and splendid.

This annual celebration of the Hot Air Balloon festival became the identity of the Taunggyi people and symbol of the local area. Hot Air Balloon festival is famous among all national races of Myanmar for its spectacular display and skillful traditional craftsmanship. The celebration of this festival illustrates the cultural property or culture heritage which means the expression and testimony of human creation of technical value. The festival first started by the Government department which was later celebrated as township festival and gradually rose to State Level and the festival is performed as the Tazaungdaing Pwe daw.

The raw materials used for the Taunggyi hot air balloon are different from other country's hot air balloon. They launch the hot air balloon which is made by traditional paper and natural fumes as fuel. The traditional paper, Shan paper, is made by the bark of the plant which is planted in local region. Year by Year, the scene of festival varied slowly. It has been changing in style and ways of performing during each festival almost every year. The festival has invented creative methods and decorations. All of the competitors want to be a winner. From that year the committee for the balloon competition permitted, government ministries, hotels and motels and stores, motor car accessories companies, gold and jewelry shops and private banks to participate in the balloon competition. So the number of balloons increased. A festival that had originated in a religious ritual and celebrated as a traditional cultural event becomes a force of unity and strength nationally has now become an economic venture for advertising. When it was first started they could send up only (5) Balloons. But by the year 2018, it had increased to (414) balloons. Year by year, it gradually appears the changing items which related to the festival.

Finding

Differences between past and present in making the hot air balloon

In previous times, making the hot air balloon for competition was a communal or social activity; each quarter of Taunggyi Township was responsible to make one hot air balloon. For this reason, the cost of making a hot air balloon was always collected from each individual household residing in a respective quarter. All households contributed to the cost of the balloon. Those days, the young lads in the quarter got together and they went round the quarter making a visit to each individual household to obtain a sufficient amount of funds. After they had collected a relatively substantial amount of money for the task, they started to make a hot air balloon at a suitable centre such as either at the library or at the administrative office of their quarter. They chose the kind of material to be made into the balloon depending on how much they could afford.

A person who had some experiences in making a hot air balloon or who could manage to make a balloon successfully taught the young men in the quarter how to make it. Under his guidance and close supervision, some young men rendered help in doing basic chores like pounding gun powder while others participated in gluing sheets of paper onto the body of the

balloon every night. Not only the young men lent their hands in the chores and offered their service to accomplish making the communal hot air balloon, but also the elderly came to the place of social activity to give them necessary suggestions and to have a chat. On the part of individual households in their locality, they supported the activity of this team by providing some snacks and traditional food every night. This activity made the young men more co-operative, more interdependent and it could promote friendship and mutual understanding. It had enabled the young men to be able to work unitedly. The young men were able to have an opportunity to follow the elder's words of admonition. They could learn new things from the older generation through listening to their life experiences. The elderly usually shared their knowledge, skills and experience and they also told the young people how to behave well in society. Thus, it had also become as the place where all young men gathered to make the communal hot air balloon and where the elderly taught them responsibilities and obligations of good citizens. Thus, it will be seen that making a hot air balloon was regarded as a social cultural activity performed communally. On the final day, all the households in the quarter participated in preparation and making arrangements to take the hot air balloon to the arena, the field where the competition was to be held. They all gathered in a single group to go to the competition area. In the past, the cost of making a hot air balloon used to be covered by whatever sum of money collected from the community; the quality and design of the balloon had to depend on how much money they had managed to collect. Accordingly, the local residents had to be satisfied with whatever materials and whatever design they could afford to make a balloon.

Nowadays, the number of hot air balloon is no longer limited to only one communal balloon. There may be one or two or more hot air balloons that will be launched in the competition due to the amount of money spent by a number of individual groups even in a single quarter. Despite that the making hot air balloon is originally supposed to be a communal activity, its direction has gradually changed into individual or group activity owing to those who want to exhibit their creativity or who can afford larger sums of money than that collected from the community. It is common practice that friends, peers and colleagues with special interest in this cultural activity pool money for the overall cost. If someone cannot afford money, he is likely to sell or pawn his property to contribute to the cost. Those who can afford money usually contribute much more than those who cannot. No matter how little one can contribute to the cost, his willingness to participate in this group activity is always appreciated. As it takes the participants a considerably long time to perform the task completely, they have to make their own arrangement for their meals. They usually bring rice from their homes and cook the meal on self-help basis. On the part of government service personnel, who are enthusiastic about their cultural activity, they have to pool money every month according to the level of their salaries. Some youths tend to save the bonus or wages they have obtained by offering their service on some social occasions such as weddings, invitation, funeral ceremonies to contribute to the cost of making a hot air balloon.

At present, the Mee Pone Pyan festival will be seen as the social relationship among the participant groups as well as between the participant groups. All the competitors show consideration to each other. All the members within one competition group build friendships. The craftsmen who make hot air balloon as a hobby have no substantial amount of money to invest, they often have to sell or pawn some of their belongings when they need money. Those who can afford money usually contribute much more than. They help each other not only in the launching of the Mee Pone Pyan but also their social activity and economic sector as well as the

numbers of other participant group. During the making the balloon, different ideas are creative among the competitors. But their aim is successfully launching the balloon. So, they hold discussions in order to come to an agreement. Thus, they maintain the unity within the competitors, and in sharing the creative thinking, solving problems together and building good, relationship with other. These activities raise awareness of individual responsibility and the need for unity to achieve the goal of the group.

The primary purpose of celebrating the Mee Pone Pyan festival was offering light or fireworks to lord Buddha. Although being devoted Buddhists who lived in Taunggyi gave their greatest homage to Buddha, this performance has both religious and cultural meaning. It represents the noble gesture of paying homage to Buddha with the fireworks of different designs. Paying homage to Buddha by lighting elaborate designs of hot air balloons and launching them into the sky is considered a praiseworthy act and meritorious deed. This festival also displays the skill of traditional craftsmanship, which as a kind of intangible cultural heritage. An average hot air balloon team is usually made up of young people from various national races since these youths share a common interest in this traditional practice as well as cultural activity regardless of their diversity in social status, race and even in religion. In carrying out their task of preparing a hot air balloon, one can vividly see social integration and social assimilation because there are a few participants in some teams who are non-Buddhists.

Each of the participating teams uses a specific design to illustrate their aim and their vision. Nearly all the balloons are decorated by the scene of the Buddha (Bodhitstatta's) renunciation as well as the image of Buddha and their aim. Although the festival is based on the Buddhist belief, some of non-Buddhists youths also take part in this cultural activity due to their interest in its fantastic nature which calls for creativity. For instance, the majority of team members in Hatha Mee Pone Pyan(hot air balloon team) belonged to other faiths. They create designs in which the images of Buddha are painted on the body of the balloon. All the competition teams which including non-Buddhist are also decorated the Buddha Image on their surface of the hot air balloon' body. If they get the prize, they will not only donate the Buddhist monastery but also do their religious belief. In fact, they are supposed to appreciate the culture of the locality despite their different religious belief. Apart from non-Buddhist youths with special interest in Myanmar culture, there are several other social classes participating in this activity.



Figure 1 making the night time balloon



Figure 2 making the day time balloon



Figure 3 Buddha image on the body of hot air balloon

Differences between past and present in launching the hot air balloon

In the past, launching the Mee kyí balloon, filling the fumes into the hot air balloon took a lot of space and time. It also required man power because the hot balloon was placed horizontally. It used to be a laborious task because the fumes are to be filled layer after layer. Later, the Balloon are full of fumes gradually. Someone may have thought of a new idea to make the balloon in the shape of an accordion after seeing the several folds of a fan. By doing so, the balloon can be easily and conveniently filled with enough fumes. Nowadays, the hot air balloons are folded like accordions. When the folded balloon is propped up with a stick in the middle, it will be in a position of a mosquito net. Thus, filling the flumes into the body of the balloon becomes easier and more convenient without man power and only members of their confused competition group. Meekyi (rocket) hot air balloons can be launched with a few people. However, launching a Meekyi mee pone (rocket hot air balloon) requires a maestro (*yansaya*-master of gunpowder) of knack and Skill. A successful launch may entirely rely on the expertise of *yansaya* such as his service, experience and accurate calculation. No matter how accurate and smart the systematic processing may be, a mishap of an unexpected burn can be caused

sometimes. The accurate calculation of *yansaya* is very important because the shorter duration a meekyi balloon takes to fill the fumes, the higher marks the team can score. A meekyi hot air balloon decorated with a variety of fireworks designs soaring in the sky is a great spectacle. It is very eye catching for the spectators. Since meekyi hot air balloon can stay in the sky for a long time, the spectators can admire and enjoy the beauty of various fireworks display to their heart's content.

Launching Seinnapan Mee Pone Pyan is very laborious and it requires man power; at least about (50) people will have to contribute their labor in this task. Seinnapan Mee Pone Pyan usually takes a relatively long time to fill the sufficient fume into it. As the hot air balloon consumes more and more fumes, it starts to more and more vigorously. So, controlling straps at the sides of the body of the balloon are skillfully manipulated to portray the designs on the surface of the balloon. Meanwhile, the team members hang several small lanterns at their right places according to the colour and design made on the surface of the balloon. In doing so, they need to take a great care for any one of these small lanterns not to catch fire. Even when a small lantern happens to catch fire, it can burn down the entire body of the balloon. For this reason, the task force has to put the small lanterns into their places both carefully and swiftly. During the launch of the hot air balloon, all team members headed by the leader have to be very careful and vigilant enough to accomplish the task successfully. This requires a special skill or knack. They must do everything with special care and paying attention to detail. The performance has social meaning and strengthens social integration because all team members have to work harmoniously and unitedly to accomplish their task successfully. So, it reflects the truth of the motto "unity is strength". The successful operation of launching a hot air balloon is mainly dependent on team work in which everyone has to co-operate with one another with caring and sharing. As a result, they become more united in whatever activities they take part in, ranging from community work to business alike.



Figure 4 Launching the night time (Meekyi) balloon



Figure 5 launching the night time



Figure 6 launching the day time balloon (Seinnapan) balloon

Discussion

According to Karin Peters, it can be said that social integration can be seen in making the hot balloon time. In previous times, the festival was based on religion and the activity was totally based on community. The practices and habits were based on community. It was also seen that the festival was celebrated according to communal values.

After many of years of celebrating the festival, cultural activities such as creativity of traditional craft was promoted in making hot air balloon and the cost of hot air balloon was not depended in community or representative quarter. Change has taken place in the nature of this cultural activity as well as communal values. At present, its nature seems to be dominated by economic factors rather than by social factors and community based management. Thus, the communal activity has devised into group activity or individual activity.

According to the meaning of communal value which is mentioned by Paul Rozin et al, one of the way is communal to social. It means that social interaction is related to communal values and the rest is sharing values. (Article 177, volume 2, July 2011). By studying the comparison of previous and present of hot air balloons festivals, although social integration is found in both past and present, communal values have changed. In the part, social interaction was found in Hot air balloons festival.

According to Chibe Mararshi, festival will see the social relationship between the participant groups as well as members of a group. (Chibe Mararshi, 2005). *Mee Pone Pyan* festival can be also seen this social relationship. All the competitors are kind to each other. All the members within one competition group build friendships. They help one another not only in the launching of *Mee Pone Pyan* but also in their social and economic factors as well as the numbers of other participant groups. Moreover during the making of the balloon, different designs created by the competitors. But their aim is to successfully launch the balloon. Therefore, they could make the discussion, held up the unity within the competitors, share the creativity thinking, solve together the problems and practical works. It can be said that this will build the relationship between each other. In present, *Mee Pone Pyan* festival will be seen as the social relationship in spite of social integration among confused the participant groups as well as between the participant groups. Before the successful of launching hot air balloon gave the

community or quarter. At present, the successful of launching hot air balloon made pride and prestige of the group (*yansaya*). The changing of communal values to individual value make the reducing of the identity of community or quarter.

Conclusion

The festival atmosphere is accomplished by religious, social and cultural functions. All the competitors are not of the same level. They are of various social status, unequal education level and different religious beliefs. It was seen that the festival is celebrated with social integration and communal values. Year by year, It can mention that the changing show communal values to individual or group values. Both past and present time, social integration especially social interaction was seen in previous and social relation is seen in present. It can also be said say that individual identity is promoted as soon as the communal identity is reduced. Although non Buddhists youths also participate in festival, the main basic believes of festival is still resting on religious of Buddhist. Hot Air Balloon festival (*Mee Pone PyanPwe*) is famous among all national races of Myanmar for its spectacular display and skillful traditional craftsmanship. *Mee Pone Pyan* festival will be performed generation to generation, the constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, the interaction with nature and their history, providing a sense of identity and continuity, and promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

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