

MON NATIONALISM AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITIONS: THE CASE OF THE MONS IN THEIR DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES¹

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Abstract

This essay is aimed to describe and analyze the invention of Mon traditions by applying Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of invented traditions. As I found in my observations in the field and in archival research, the Mons in their homeland and their diasporic communities overseas have invented a number of traditions in order to show solidarity. These include national costumes, a national flag, a national anthem, and a national day.

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Introduction

My fieldwork has been conducted in Wangka Village (Fang Mon), Moo 2, Tumbon Nong Luu, Sangkhlaburi District of Kanchanaburi Province. I interviewed Mon migrants at this site and also did research into the circumstances they face. This research project started in 2003 and ended in 2005.

Most Mons from Sangkhlaburi have been denied the right to Thai citizenship, even though they were born in Thailand to Mon parents who migrated to the country after 1948 and made homes there. The denial of rights has had a variety of impacts on these people. Several thousand Mons from Burma who arrived in Thailand before 1976 have been issued 'pink cards,' whereas immigrants arriving in Thailand after 1976 were issued 'orange cards.' Both identification cards³ allow the Mons

³ According to the Thai Immigration Law, highlanders and displaced ethnic minority groups are classified into 19 groups with 19 different colored cards as can be further clarified.

(1) People in the Hilly Areas (Highlands) (light blue card) holding non-Thai national ID cards and granted Thai citizenship by changing their nationality.

(2) KMT(Koumintang) Veterans (white cards): the first generation has been offered documents that specified a particular location of their permanent residence and allowed them to change their nationality, whereas the second and third generations are granted Thai citizenship.

(3) The non-military, Haw Chinese Migrants (yellow card): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(4) The Independent Haw Chinese (white card with an orange frame): the first generation are granted documents specifying

their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(5) Displaced Burmese Persons (pink card): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(6) Illegal Entrants from Burma who came into the country after March 6, 1976 (having permanent residence) (orange card) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(7) Illegal Entrants from Burma who came into the country after March 6, 1976 (staying with employers) (purple card) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(8) Vietnamese Migrants (white card with a navy blue frame): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(9) Laotian Migrants (light blue card): there is still no Cabinet Resolution to grant them any type of status yet.

(10) Nepalese Migrants (green card): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(11) Malayo-Chinese, Communist Veterans (green card): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(12) Tai-Lue (orange card): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(13) Phi Tong Luang (light blue card): these indigenous people, the original inhabitants (*khon tai dangdoem*), have been

to stay indefinitely and to work in the border provinces but nowhere else. If they need to leave their settlement, they must ask permission from district officials. They are not allowed to look for jobs in any other areas except as issued on their cards nor are they able to further their study beyond junior high school (Mattayom Suksa 3), except those whose families are able to support them when furthering their higher level of education

endorsed to be Thai nationals according to the regulations.

(14) Migrants from Ko Kong, Cambodia (green card) who were born to Thai parents and came into the country prior to November 15, 1977: the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(15) Migrants from Ko Kong, Cambodia (green card) who were born to Thai parents and came into Thailand after November 15, 1977 have not yet been granted any type of status by Cabinet Resolution.

(16) Illegal Entrants from Cambodia (white card with a red frame): there is no Cabinet Resolution available to grant them any type of status yet.

(17) Displaced Burmese Persons who were born to Thai parents and came into Thailand prior to March 9, 1976 (yellow card with a navy blue frame): the first generation are granted documents specifying their permanent residence, and the second and the third generations who were born here in Thailand are granted Thai citizenship.

(18) Displaced Burmese Persons who were born to Thai parents and entered Thailand after March 9, 1976 (yellow card with a navy blue frame) are allowed to extend their temporary stay with unlimited duration and have been granted permission to work.

(19) Communities in the Highlands (green card with a red frame): the first generation who migrated into Thailand are granted documents specifying their permanent residence (Archavanitkul, 2005).

(Mattayom Suksa 6) either in the school located in Sangkhlaburi district or schools in districts nearby like Thong Paphoom or even in Kanchanaburi Province. The main problem faced by those Mon students is the lack of official documents such as ID cards or house registration documents when applying for a job or furthering their education. Nevertheless, for the past few years the situation has been better for the Mon offspring since school administrators have become more flexible and thus provide an opportunity for those children to further their studies in state-run institutions. Still, they are prone to be discriminated against by local Thai officials when they are required to renew their cards every year. Officials may demand to see their cards at any time, and some even confiscate their cards without giving proper reasons. (Dhienpanya and others, 2004: 468-469; Sripanguen, 2000: 208)

However, since 2004 a number of pink card holders have been allowed to apply for Thai citizenship with the local administrator known as the *phuyaiban*. About 3,000 people applied and submitted relevant documents. Some are not eligible to apply for this status because they were born in Burma, but their offspring born in Thailand are. Some parents felt that their status did not matter so long as their children could become Thai citizens with full rights.⁴

The Mon children of Wangka Village attend a locally-run pre-school and a state-run school comprising primary and middle grades, both within short walking distance

of the village center. The language used as a medium of instruction in all Thai schools is exclusively Standard or Central Thai so the younger generation of Mon people is facing cultural assimilation into the Thai mainstream.

There is a total ban on speaking Mon at the school. The teachers give a psychological reason for the ban, saying that they do not want their students to feel inferior to their Thai counterparts once they grow up. This idea is in accordance with the assimilation policy of the Thai authorities. As Khachadphai Burutsapatana writes about applying the process of acculturation or 'Thai-ization' to Mon descendants by means of schooling, 'Mon children who were born here in Thailand (at Sangkhlaburi) have been accommodated in the local school system, and they are quite literate in Thai. Hopefully, it will not be difficult for them to be *acculturated* (italics added) to become Thais one day' (Burusapatana, 1997: 81).

However, from my informal interviews with the new generation of Mon descendants in Sangkhlaburi, I found that they lacked motivation to further their education after finishing high school since it is impossible for them to get legal jobs after graduation. They can only be hired as illegal migrant workers in sweatshop industries located in suburban areas of Bangkok and in other parts of the country due to their status as non-Thai citizens. Theoretically, both the pink and the orange card holders have restrictions on travel out of Sangkhlaburi. Fortunately, since 2004 the Thai government has become more flexible with migrant workers and thus allows their employers to register them with local officials and accompany them to

⁴ Interview with Mons at the field-site at Wangka Village, August 2, 2004.

workplaces located in Bangkok and the like.

In sum, the Mon descendants at Sangkhlaburi have encountered various barriers due to their lack of Thai citizenship. Then in 2004 when the Thai government started to apply the policy of providing the offspring of illegal migrants in Thailand with the chance to apply for Thai citizenship since they were born here in Thailand, the third generation of Mons in Wangka Village did apply for their birthright status. Meanwhile, these Mon youths are on the brink of losing their Mon-ness by being gradually assimilated into the Thai mainstream. Accordingly, the Mons since their nationalist period (1945-2005) have invented a variety of symbols and rituals to claim their rights as a free state with its autonomy and to try to maintain their solidarity and their ethnic identity or Mon-ness. These innovations have been shared by the Mons in their home country and by those in diasporic communities around the world.

This article is divided into three parts: namely (1) the migration of the Mons into Thailand; (2) Mon nationalist movements; and (3) the invention of Mon traditions.

Part I: The Migration of the Mons into Siam/Thailand

The Migration of the Mons into Siam/Thailand

Historically, wars between Siam and Burma have affected ethnic groups along the border with Burma, especially the Mons and Karens, since they were exploited and abused by both the Siamese and Burmese armies. These indigenous peoples were drafted as soldiers. Some

became forced labor in constructing strategic roads or cultivating food crops to feed whole armies during long wars. However, the Mons tried to stay on good terms with the Siamese. According to Robert Halliday, 'One of the dangers to the Burmese monarchs in the invasions from Siam was the fact that the Mons, who were the nearest neighbours to the Siamese, were always ready to be on friendly terms with the invaders' (Halliday, 1986: 10).

During the period from around the third century C.E. to the thirteenth century, the Mons had kingdoms in central and northern Thailand as well as in Lower Burma. They were famous for their conversion to Buddhism before any other people in mainland Southeast Asia (Keyes, 1987: 19).

However, the Burmans, their northern rivals, came to power and established a kingdom in Pagan, and in 1057, King Anawrahta began to wage war on the neighboring Mon kingdom. The rationale given for the legitimacy of his invasion was that the Mon monarch, King Manuha of Thaton, had refused to give him a copy of the Theravada Buddhist scriptures (Fink, 2001: 17).

Moreover, during the long pre-colonial period, the Mons tried very hard to maintain their kingdoms as well as to protect themselves against continuing invasions by Burman royal armies. As noted by Hall (quoted in Halliday, 1986), 'The Mons never lost their desire for independence and were bound one day to make another bid at restoring the kingdom of Pegu,' (Halliday, 1986: 10) but to no avail because in 1757 they lost their last kingdom at Pegu to a man of prowess, King Alaungphaya, the king of the

Burmans, and ever since they have been 'a people without a country.'⁵

Basically, the severe oppression of the Mons by Burman kings caused them to migrate in great numbers to Siam, where they were warmly welcomed. This can be seen in a letter written in 1633 by the Mons of Martaban which says, 'The Lord of the golden prasada, the righteous king of Ayuthia, was the haven of the Mon race, and on every occasion saved the lives of the Mon people' (Halliday, 1986: 10)

Nonetheless, there are some discrepancies in the records regarding the exact number of Mon migrants into Siam during the Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and early Bangkok periods. According to Halliday (1986: 10), there were four major migrations starting from the Ayutthaya period: the first during the reign of King Naresuan (1590-1605); next in 1660 during the reign of King Narai, a fact mentioned in both Siamese and Mon histories; again in 1774 during the Thonburi period; and the last in 1814 in the Bangkok period.

Traditionally, since the Ayutthaya period, Mon men who migrated to Siam were recruited to be soldiers. In the early Bangkok period these soldiers were under the control of the Department of Mon Regiments with Chao Phaya Mahayotha as the commander in chief. The Mon troops were assigned to five different departments (Jeosiwong, 1993: 510).

A Royal Burmese Chronicle mentioned 1775 in the Thonburi period as the time

⁵ A phrase coined by Robert Halliday to refer to the Mon ethnic groups who became minority groups in Burma and to descendants of Mon migrants to Thailand in the Thonburi and early Bangkok Periods assimilated to be Thai now.

with the largest number of refugees, amounting to 10,000 according to a Thai historian, Nitthi Iaosiwong. Regardless of the exact number, additional manpower in Central Siam would become an important political factor in strengthening the newly founded kingdom (Jeosiwong, 1993: 513).

Moreover, each time Bangkok learned about any migration of Mons into Siam, people of high position were assigned to receive them at the borderlands. For example, in the reign of King Rama II, Prince Maha Mongkut, who would later come to the throne as King Rama IV, was assigned this duty. The Mon migrants were allotted suitable pieces of land for housing and farming and given some provisions (Jeosiwong, 1993: 11). Moreover, high-ranking officials in the Mon court were assigned their former positions in the Siamese court (Deepadung and others, 1995: 8).

Therefore, in the early Bangkok period, a number of the Mons were among the high officers of the Siamese court, as noted by Captain Burney, the British envoy to Siam at the time of the first Anglo-Burmese war. They were 'the best troop and artisans and in fact the most useful subjects belonging to Siam ... Many of them are employed by the court in situations of great trust and confidence' (Halliday, 1999: 18). For instance, in 1787 during the reign of King Rama I, Binnya Sein was promoted to a position of highest nobility in the Siamese court as Chao Phraya Maha Yotha. He controlled all the Mon armies in Siam after defeating the Burmese armies in Tavoy (Deepadung and others, 1995: 36).

The Mon migration was distinctive in that it involved the movement of a whole community into Siam. Thus, each

household leader was accompanied by his immediate family. Consequently, the Mons were able to re-establish their self-contained communities in Siam without any need to integrate with the Siamese. Moreover, since their communities were largely economically self-sufficient, opportunities to exchange commodities with people from other communities were rather rare. Accordingly, Mon communities at that time were able to maintain their cultural as well as ethnic identity for a very long period of time (Jeosiwong, 1993: 511).

In Thailand today, small Mon populations descended from refugees from Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries still dwell in western Thailand and in the area around Bangkok. These Mon descendants have attempted to retain their ethnic identity, which is centered on Buddhism and the conservation of the cultural heritage of their ancestors. As noted by Keyes, 'These Mon people continue to speak their own language, although they are almost universally bilingual in Thai, and continue to observe some distinctive customs that are mainly associated with their own Buddhist temple-monasteries' (Keyes, 1997: 19).

However, the migration of the Mons into Thailand has not ceased. This is mainly due to political unrest resulting from the civil war involving various ethnic insurgencies and the Burmese regimes established after the country gained independence from the British in 1948. Since then, Burma has become a focus of attention and concern by the international community as the country which 'has some of the longest running insurgencies in the world' (Kramer, 2005: 33).

The Migration of the Mons into Sangkhlaburi

Wangka Village is a semi-permanent Mon settlement located in the Thai borderlands. Members of this community migrated into Thailand after World War II because of political conflicts among various ethnic groups in Burma, causing the Burmese military to crack down on ethnic insurgents. Groups of immigrants fled from both armed conflict (Dhienpanya and others, 2004: 280-281; Sripanguen, 2000: 218) and starvation in their homelands and took refuge along the Thai-Burma border. Some of the Mon ethnic groups resided temporarily in settlements provided by the Thai government for humanitarian reasons in Sangkhlaburi, where they were surrounded by a neighborhood of other Mon communities, such as Ban Mongsatay, Ban Mai, Songklia, and the Three Pagodas Pass.⁶

The first group of Mons to arrive at Sangkhlaburi in June 1949 numbered about 60 households and included two Buddhist monks. They were originally from Yebu Village about 40 km northwest of Three Pagodas Pass. These villagers were accused of being sympathizers of Mon resistance groups, so Burmese troops sacked and burned their village. Thousands of villagers became homeless and some fled to Thailand seeking help from their relatives there. Since then, they have settled permanently on Thai soil, and most have married Mons, Thai, Mon-Thai, or Thai-Raman from old Mon communities near Bangkok. Some have married Burmese (Sripanguen, 2000: 218).

⁶ Interview with Mons at Wangka Village, August 2, 2004.

After 1962, the peak productivity of the Thai-Burma border trade at Sangkhlaburi brought about a new wave of immigrants from Burma into Sangkhlaburi. Thus, the village was enlarged. In 1984, about 800 households in Sangkhlaburi Mon villages were relocated to their present site when the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) constructed a hydroelectric dam near their former location. However, since they are not Thai citizens, the Thai authorities did not provide them with land for housing or for farming, though they had lost their land with the construction of the hydroelectric project. Meanwhile the authorities provided 12 rai (about 5 acres) of farmland and a housing site to each family with Thai citizenship in that area.⁷

In the mid-1990s, with a population of over one thousand households, the Mon village of Wangka is the largest long-term Mon settlement of its kind in the Thai borderland. Nowadays, the Mons have become the dominant segment of the population in the village of about 10,000. Almost all of them are living on the monastery grounds of Wat Wangka Wiwaikaram, which was founded by Venerable Abbot Luang Pho Uttama, a Mon monk who has been a 'firm foundation stone' for the village and a negotiator between the Mon villagers and the Thai authorities. This Venerable Abbot is also well known for humanitarian relief work along the Thai-Burma border, distributing rice and other provisions to displaced persons taking refuge in nearby border areas, regardless of their ethnic background or political ideology, using

supplies donated by his religious followers in Thailand (Lang, 2002: 136-137).

Most villagers in Wangka are engaged in small businesses, day labor, trading or fishing, whereas a number of young women and men are hired as migrant workers in the industrial provinces located on the periphery of Bangkok. Nevertheless, very few have been granted Thai citizenship or have full Thai identification papers. Most are issued with short-lived ID in the form of different colored cards; for example, 'pink cards' signifying the status of being 'displaced persons' though they are Thai-born descendants of Mons who migrated to Thailand as long as 50 years ago.

Part II: Mon Nationalist Movements (1945–2005)

According to Kachadphai Burusapattana, the political movements of the Mons to gain self-determination were not as assiduous as those of the other ethnic groups like the Karens or the Shans due to the fact that the Mons have been assimilating into the mainstream culture of the Burmans over a very long period of time (Burusapattana, 1997: 40). However, this point of view needs to be carefully examined, and I agree with Smith's critique (Carey, 1997: 10-11) of the Burmese historian Daw Mya Sein, who wrote in the mid-1940s that in spite of the 'animosities between the three principal sub-families [that is, ethno-linguistic groups] in Burma – the Mon-Khmer, the Tibeto-Burman and the Shan – [...] the assimilation and transformation of these races into a united nation has been steadily progressing for generations.' However, he also notes that 'post-colonial Burma has yet to find a cohesive national and political

⁷ Interview with Mons at Wangka Village, August 2, 2004.

identity, which will both bring lasting peace and allow the country to take its proper place [...] in the international community of nations' (Carey, 1997: 10-11).

A number of Mon nationalist movements were established after the colonial period in Burma to resist the assimilationist schemes of the Burman regimes, which insisted on the use of Burmese as the official language and intervened in the conservation of literature, culture and art of the indigenous people of Burma. For example, the first Mon nationalist organization, the Mon National Defense Organization (MNDO) was founded by Nai Hla Maung and Nai San Thu in 1948 as the paramilitary wing of the Mon Freedom League (MFL) and the Mon United Front (MUF). Nai Shwe Kyin was the leader of the MFL and Nai Hla Muang was the leader of the MUF. There was also another nationalist organization called the United Mon Association (UMA) with U Po Cho as its leader. About a year later, Mon nationalist factions went underground in order to fight for autonomy in the same manner as the Karens (South, 2003: 106-107).

In 1952, the MFL, the MUF and the UMA were dissolved and replaced by the Mon People's Front, with Nai Aung Thun as the leader. This organization was defeated by the Burmese regime on July 19, 1958 (South, 2003: 10). Only one day later, Nai Shwe Kyin established both the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Mon National Army (Burusapatana, 1997: 41).

The reason for the establishment of this party, according to its founder, was 'to establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free

nationalities exercising the full right of self-determination inclusive of right of secession' (Lang, 2002: 117).

In 1981, there were internal conflicts among the NMSP members themselves. Thereafter they split into two factions: one had Nai Shwe Kyin as the leader, and the other was headed by Nai Non La. Then, in 1987 both sides agreed to re-unite, with Nai Shwe Kyin as the president. Their permanent headquarters were located just opposite Sangkhlaburi district in Kanchanaburi province.⁸

The political movement of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) had a paramilitary wing, which was infamous for its rigor or efficiency in terms of military tactics and use of ammunition compared to the paramilitaries of the Karens or the Kachins. Nonetheless, in the more than 40 years since, it has been well recognized for its single-minded determination to found an autonomous state in Burma. Moreover, the party and its militia have been strongly supported by the Mons in Burma and Thailand. Apart from its political movement in Burma, the NMSP has had humanitarian relief organizations to provide aid and supplies to needy Mon migrants fleeing civil wars in Burma and taking refuge in the Thai-Burma borderlands (Burusapatana, 1997: 53-54; Trichote, 1999: 120).

⁸ Some observers believe this conflict was due to ideological divisions. That is, the Non La group accused Nai Shwe Kyin and his supporters of pro-Maoist tendencies. Nai Shwe Kyin in turn charged his rivals with supporting the opposition Soviet bloc. There was also an assumption that the 1981-87 NMSP was fundamentally the result of a struggle among the leadership over patronage and the control of key resources (South, 2003: 136).

Like other ethnic insurgent groups at that time, both the NMSP and the KNU gained revenue from taxing black market trade at the Thai-Burma border. Their headquarters and tollgates were located in the Three Pagodas Pass region. In 1988, a war broke out between these two ethnic insurgent factions over control of trade through Three Pagodas Pass, the area under their joint control. Seeing that unity was powerful, they came to a peaceful resolution of the conflict and continued to live and work together in spite of their differences (Silverstein, 1997: 140).

However, in 1990 the Burmese army overran their headquarters at Three Pagodas Pass. This event has been dubbed 'the Fall of Three Pagodas Pass.' But most Mon insurgents were able to escape and head north or south of their former base, fighting alongside the Karens (Silverstein, 1997: 113). Meanwhile, because of the capture of Three Pagodas Pass by the Burmese army, a boundary dispute erupted between Thailand and Burma since the Burmese troops claimed that the immediate territory around the three pagodas at the pass belonged to Burma according to a British colonial map. Consequently, the Burmese army tried to claim areas on the Thai side of the pass. Since then, this area has become the key site of boundary disputes between Thailand and Burma (Lang, 2002: 112).

Moreover, as a result of the fall of Three Pagodas Pass, ten thousand Mon civilians fled across the border into Thailand and were soon organized into five main camps on the Thai side of the border.

The NMSP-SLORC Ceasefire

In 1995, the NMSP entered into a ceasefire agreement with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) because the Mons had been scattered by a massive Burmese military presence related to the construction of a gas pipeline from the Yadana gas fields to Thailand. The Royal Thai Army and the National Security Council of Thailand forced the NMSP to agree to a ceasefire with the Burmese army, the Tatmadaw, through the relocation of Mon refugees who were victims of the civil war. The intention was to open the way for the economic exploitation of parts of Lower Burma (Rajah, 1998: 136).

However, the new Mon nationalist organization under the name Mon Unity League (MUL), a non-violent political movement based in Thailand with a network in Europe and North America, has criticized the so-called improvements gained in the Mon State after the NMSP entered into the ceasefire agreement with SLORC.

Although the NMSP has for its part and for over five years conformed to the ceasefire agreement entered into with the SLORC/SPDC military government of Burma in 1996, the human rights situation in Mon areas of Burma has not improved as had been expected. In many respects similar to the fates of Burma's other under and unrepresented ethnic minorities, the Mon continue to suffer from regular and frequent conscription of forced labor (including as

porters for the military), various types of illegal and arbitrary taxes, paddy collection and land seizures, as well as continued interruption and harassment of Mon efforts in language education and cultural and literary production.⁹

A number of western academics have criticized the ceasefire agreements made by SLORC/SPDC and representatives from ethnic insurgent groups. As Silverstein notes, 'They have failed to address the basic economic, political and constitutional questions of concern to the minorities, issues which have divided the minorities and Burmans since the nation recovered its independence in 1948' (Silverstein, 1997: 151).

Rather, the ceasefire agreement has shared some characteristics with a military truce, and when it was finally concluded, the government acclaimed it as 'national reconciliation achieved through sincerity and mutual understanding' (Lang, 2002: 117). Moreover, the NMSP-SLORC truce itself was treated as a 'gentleman's agreement' since no treaty or memorandum was signed (Burusapatana, 1997 : 56; South, 2003: 223). What was to be gained as a result of going into the 'legal fold' or the NMSP being 'steadfast' with the Rangoon regime was 'national development,' like funding for the restoration of deteriorated infrastructure facilities, such as roads in Mon State. The NMSP also launched negotiations to conduct business; namely, import-export activities, logging, fishing, and other joint ventures. On the matter of forced labor

and porter services, the Rangoon regime agreed in principle that these practices would finally cease and that contracts would finally be applied to secure labor for infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, SLORC could not promise that the Tatmadaw would cease conscripting porters when troops were sent in and around the area once the ceasefire process was concluded (Lang, 2002: 117).

In the long run, the Mons in Burma as well as in their diasporic communities both in Thailand and overseas have tried to maintain their ethnic identity in the form of traditions.

Part III: The Invention of Mon Traditions

The Mon and their nationalist movements in Burma and their diasporic communities around the world have created many symbols and conventions to help maintain their ethnic identity and to further their claim to self-determination in a free state. Thus, I have used Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of 'the invention of tradition' in my analysis (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003). According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, the term 'invented tradition' is applied in a broad, but not imprecise, sense that encompasses 'traditions' as invented, constructed, and formally established. These come to light in a manner that can be traced back to a datable period during which they are established very rapidly. Invented tradition is 'a set of practices, normally governed by implicitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a

⁹ Mon Unity League, 'General Statement,' in *MUL Report International Conference, 1*, http://www.mrc-usa.org/mul_report1.htm

suitable historic past' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003: 1).

Hobsbawm and Ranger's approach of 'invented tradition' is applicable to my analysis because the Mons are proud of their history, their past kingdoms, and the cultural legacy handed down to them by their ancestors. The Mon people have created a number of traditions such as the Mon National Flag, the Mon National Day, the Mon National Anthem, Mon formal costumes, and a legendary prophecy about their future political supremacy. All these symbols have been shared by the Mons on both sides of the Thai-Burma border as well as by Thai-Mon communities near Bangkok and even by the Mons in their diasporic communities overseas.

The Mon National Flag

The Mon national flag is also used by the New Mon State Party (NMSP), a well-known nationalist movement that lost its prominent political role among Mon patriotic nationalists once it arranged a ceasefire agreement with State Law Order Restoration Council/ State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) in 1995. This flag can be traced back to 1958 when the NMSP was established by Nai Shwe Kyin. The flag shows a yellow sheldrake or sacred goose flying towards a light-blue star. According to one NMSP source, 'Red stands for courage and bravery; yellow for glory and nobility; and blue for truth. The light blue star signifies the guiding Pole Star – the symbol of our conviction.'¹⁰

¹⁰ The New Mon State Party, *Mon National Liberation Movement (in Brief)*. 1980, 8, (unpublished).

The golden sheldrake symbolizing the Mons is known in Mon as 'bop.' In Pali this aquatic bird is named hamsa or hongsa, which is derived from Hamsavati in Pali. Hamsavati/Hongsawaddy (I: From 1281 to 1539; and II: From 1541 to 1774) was one of the most prosperous kingdoms in Mon history. The sacred bird was selected to signify the Hongsawaddy Kingdom. The Mons believe that at the time of the Lord Buddha, the Mon lands were still submerged beneath the sea. Some years after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed overhead on an aerial tour of the lands east of India and noticed two sheldrakes, the female perched upon the back of the male, settled on a pinnacle sticking out of the sea. The Lord Buddha prophesied that a great nation would one day emerge from the sea there and that its people would glorify Buddhism. Several centuries later, the god Indra founded the city of Hongsawaddy (or Pegu) and handed it over to two brothers, Samala and Vimala, princes of Thaton. A great city was built on the spot where the sheldrakes had rested (South, 2003: 52-53).

Historically, the flag used by the Mons since they still had their own kingdom in Lower Burma contained the figure of a three-faced man with the body of a lion, known as the lion man or manus singha in Mon.

The Mon National Anthem

The lyrics of the Mon anthem were written by the late Nai Shwe Kyin, the founder of the NMSP, whereas the melody was composed by Captain Anon Puntarikapa in 1948, the year when the Mon started their revolt against the Burmese government. Several years later, the

anthem was recorded in Thailand by Thai-Raman people from various old Mon communities located near Bangkok.¹¹ The Mon National Anthem goes as follows:

Our kingdom, our history, and our prestige were established by our ancestors, who lost their flesh, their blood, and their sweat. These legacies have been handed down to us in both our hearts and souls. Let us make them survive for the prosperity of our Ramanyadesa [Monland]¹² (my translation).

The Mon National Day

The Mon National Day is celebrated every year during the night of the waning moon of the third lunar month to commemorate the founding of the city of Hongsawaddy (or Pegu). The Mons in Burma hold a magnificent celebration. At Three Pagodas Pass, the celebration includes a parade by the Mon National Army, speeches given by Mon patriotic leaders, Mon classical dances, and various other kinds of entertainment (Paladsing, 1972: 8). The Mon migrant community in the U.S. in Fort Wayne, Indiana also celebrates Mon National Day. For example, last year they organized the 57th anniversary of Mon National Day on February 7, 2004. This was a great event since there was a gathering of distinguished guests and Mon migrants from the diaspora in the U.S. The well-wishers consisted of a professor, a representative of the local congressman, a representative of the Fort Wayne mayor,

and representatives from many other ethnic communities in Fort Wayne. Like any ritual to commemorate the founding of a nation state, the anniversary program started with a salute to the Mon National Flag, the Mon National Anthem, and a tribute to Mon patriots who had lost their lives in the cause of freedom. This was followed by patriotic speeches by members of the nationalist movements in exile and by well-wishers and ended with Mon traditional dances.¹³

The Mon National Day was first adopted by the United Mon Association (UMA) founded by U Po Cho, and it has become his lasting contribution to the Mon nationalist movement to commemorate the legendary founding of Hongsawaddy, the golden kingdom of the Mons in Lower Burma (South, 2003: 101).

In 2005 the Mon Youth Club of Bangkok held their National Day ceremonies at Wat Sattha Tham, a temple in Samutsakorn province. The atmosphere of the celebration was that of promoting Mon traditions and culture rather than patriotism among fellow Mon people. Basically, it seemed that the intention of the organizers was to promote tourism by offering cultural demonstrations consisting of a Mon food procession, the making of sand pagodas, Mon music and Mon dances by representatives from various Mon communities in both Thailand and Burma. Moreover, there were demonstrations of Mon traditional sports. A well-known Thai historian and anthropologist, Sisak Walipodom gave a speech in Thai about the historical background of Mon

¹¹ Interview with Sunthorn Sripangern, General Secretary of the Mon Unity League via e-mail on February 21, 2005.

¹² In Thailand, many terms can be used to refer to the Mon ethnic group; namely Raman, Meng (northern dialect), or Talaing, while the old Mon land is known as Ramanyadesa.

¹³ The Agenda of the 57th Anniversary of Mon National Day http://www.mrc-usa.org/aganda-57th_mnd.htm

communities in Thailand. At the same time, he emphasized not only the significance of Mon culture but also the greatness of Mon civilization in Southeast Asia in the past, particularly its adoption of Buddhism. Although the Mons have not been able to maintain their independence and sovereignty, they have been able to preserve their language, culture, traditions and Buddhism very firmly – thus helping to protect Thailand from some of the worst aspects of globalization and capitalism. Moreover, Mon food is healthy consisting mainly of vegetables and herbs found locally. These should be promoted for tourism. In the end, he concluded that he believed that Mon communities in Thailand are bigger and culturally stronger than their counterparts in Burma.¹⁴

However, Mon National Day ceremonies held on the Thai-Burma border had a totally different atmosphere. There was a demonstration of the glory of the NMSP with a parade of Mon soldiers and speeches given by the elite of the NMSP. Some of the Mons who participated in this celebration appreciated the more militaristic and patriotic aspects of this ceremony because they felt proud of the long fight of the party to gain autonomy, though they have yet to fulfill their mission. This was particularly true of those who were NMSP veterans.¹⁵ A Thai-based Mon civilian whose father had been an NMSP soldier said that during the time when the NMSP was still very active and had not yet entered into a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw, the celebration of Mon National Day was treated as very

sacred and meaningful by every Mon in Burma and Thailand alike. But after the NMSP agreed to the ceasefire with the Rangoon regime, he said mockingly that participating in this nationalistic celebration has been more or less like going to a village fair.¹⁶

Mon Prophecy

Mon nationalists have created a prophecy or prediction that one day they would defeat their enemy, the Burmans, and live in freedom in their own autonomous state. This prophetic story makes use of symbols signifying historical events and peoples. The prophecy has five parts, allegorically tracing the history of Burma from pre-colonial times to the present and on into an imagined future. This prophecy gives the Mons heart to continue their struggle for self-determination and serves their psychological battle for political ascendancy, which is as important as their physical struggle. The five parts of this Mon prophecy are as follows:

(1) The Brahmini-duck, or sheldrake, the national symbol of the Mons, would alight on the lake close to the eighteenth century capital of Burma, Ava. But it would fall prey to the bow of a hunter from Moktsobo Village. This story symbolizes the rise of King Alaungphaya, founder of the Kongbaung dynasty, who was born in Moktsobo village and drove the Mons from Ava and Upper Burma in 1752.

(2) The hunter from Moktsobo would be beaten by an umbrella stick, which would prevent him from slaughtering the sheldrake. The British, who were

¹⁴ A summary of electronic mail from Sunthorn Sripangern, who participated in the latest Mon National Day on February 20, 2005 at Wat Sathatham, Samutsongkram province.

¹⁵ Interview with a Mon lady who used to be an NMSP soldier, June 11, 2005.

¹⁶ Interview with a Mon teacher who was born in Thailand, June 11, 2005.

represented as the umbrella stick, defeated the Kongbaung dynasty and colonized the whole country in three Anglo-Burmese wars, in 1824, 1852 and 1855. The British exploited the resources of Lower Burma for over a century and of Upper Burma for over half a century, leaving the native people in poverty.

(3) The umbrella stick in turn would be struck by lightning and an alliance would be entered into with the lord of the sun and moon. The Japanese, who were personified as the lightning, drove the British out of Burma in only four months in 1942, and 30 comrades, Burmese nationalists led by Bo Aung San, sided with the Japanese whose national flag depicts the sun. At the time of the Japanese invasion, Minami, a Japanese military officer, was dubbed 'Bo Mogyo,' which literally means lightning, by a Burmese astrologer, thus reinforcing the prediction.

(4) The lightning in turn would be devoured by a powerful lion, whereby the shores of the seas would be heaped with skeletons. The allies, led by the superpower the United States, defeated the Japanese, annihilating the Japanese navy during the Second World War, resulting in floating corpses being washed ashore.

(5) The lions would restore the crest of the Brahmini-duck, which would cause the lord peacocks to take flight and hide in bamboo groves. The Brahmini-duck would fly aloft to chase the lord peacocks away and to hoist its own ensign. Although the peahens had laid their eggs (initiated independence), the chicks when hatched would turn out to be Brahmini-ducks, meaning that though independence was regained in the name of the Burmans, the real rulers would be the Mons. The

peacocks' feathers would turn yellow, and the birds would reclaim themselves as Brahmini-ducks, meaning that the Burmese would then reclaim themselves as Mons (Thong Tai, 1991: 70-71).

There is another version of the Mon prophecy told by a senior Mon monk, Akkara Mahar Bandhita of Burma, who passed away in 1996 at the age of 82. He told this prophecy in Burmese and clarified its meaning. This kind of prophecy is called 'Miang Jeng' in Mon and 'Tabaung' in Burmese. It is the prediction of a person who practiced dhamma and meditation in those days and at the same time foretold the fate of the country. This specific prophecy was once sung as a song by a well-known Burmese singer, Khin Maung Zin, during the time of British rule in Burma. It was banned by the British regime as seditious. The prophecy, which was told in Burmese, is as follows:

shwe hinthar in go sin (A golden swan went into the lake.)

mok so lay neh kwin (The hunter shot it with a crossbow.)

mok so go hti yo yeik baik pan aung hlaung yuoh htar (The hunter was hit by an umbrella stick and left exhausted.)

hti yo go mojo pyit kwin nay la min neh mate chin htar (The umbrella stick was struck by lightning that was allied with the sun and the moon.)

ta go gye taw chinthe mojo go phan sar pinle kannar hmar ayo taung lo pong (A powerful lion held the lightning that caused the shore to fill with bones.)

chinthe doh tadwe shwe hinthar amauk tin (The lion put a crest on the golden swan).

*daung min doh htwet shwe waylu taw
hmar pohn yuoh ne* (The lord of the
peacocks fled into the jungle.)

*shwe hinthar kaungkin pyan alan htu yuoh
ne* (The golden swan flew into the sky
holding a flag.)

*u kya u kya daung zartar pauk taw akhar
shwe hinthar* (The peahens laid eggs that
when hatched became golden swans.)

*aye mya aye mya tharyar bi anar gat ay
gat ay khit* (That there will be a peaceful
time in the future.)¹⁷

The first version of the prophecy appears to be a clarification of the latter. However, both of them foretold the political situation from the beginning of the Konbaung dynasty founded by the hunter from Moktsobo, or King Alaungphaya, during the pre-colonial period up to the beginning of the colonial period. There was a great endeavor to throw off the British colonial yoke from the Burmese. This could be fulfilled by the 30 masters or 'Thakin' led by General Aung San. This episode coincided with the occupation by the Japanese army in World War II. However, the Japanese turned out to be new tyrants who tried to colonize Burma. Thus, all the Burmese joined forces to get rid of their new oppressors by means of underground movements until they were able to fulfill their destiny. In due course, the British regime returned to re-claim sovereignty over Burma. Shortly after that, when Burma gained her independence in 1948, the civil war

between ethnic insurgent groups and the Burman regime broke out as minority groups sought autonomy. This was especially true for the Mons, who used to have a kingdom and great civilization in Lower Burma. Likely the creator of this prophecy was a Mon who foretold it when Burma was again under British rule once the Japanese army had been defeated by the Allies at the end of World War II.

This prophecy or prediction is a kind of millenarian belief, which offers hope for a new heaven, a new world, a new era when all the chaos and many problems of society will be solved and replaced by justice and peace in the future. Sometimes these prophecies may lead to popular movements to put an end to an oppressive regime or to change people's ideas or to wait for a new era of fecundity and serenity to come (Bowen, 2002: 254). For example, some Buddhists believe in the Sri Ariyametrai era, which is expected to arrive 5,000 years after the Lord Buddha passed away.

According to Bowen (2002: 254), these kinds of movements occur especially when there has been an abrupt change in society and people feel that this has threatened their old way of life. Moreover, this change not only triggers a popular reaction but also leads to innovation (Bowen, 2002: 254). In the case of Burma, various ethnic groups were suppressed not only by the Burmans but also by the British as well as the Japanese. The prophecy was not crystal clear and people required basic skill in reading between the lines. The creator of the prediction, who probably was a holy person or monk, made use of various symbols in the form of personification: namely the hunter, the golden swan, the peacock, the umbrella stick, the lion, the lightning, the sun and

¹⁷ This version was told by Sunthorn Sripangern, who is the general secretary of the Mon Unity League (MUL), via e-mail, February 20, 2005.

the moon, and readers needed to use their interpretive skills. The oracular nature of the prophecy made it seem sacred.

A number of millenarian movements, such as the Saya San Rebellion (1930-32), occurred in Burma when this country was under British colonial rule. Saya San led poor Burmese peasants to fight against the discrimination and oppression of the British colonial regime. However, the rebels were crushed by the British, and Saya San was executed. Later when the Mon prophecy was sung by a well-known Burmese singer, it was banned by the British, possibly for fear that history would repeat itself.

It is apparent that invented traditions, such as the Mon national anthem, the Mon national flag, the Mon National Day and even the Mon prophecy, signify Mon nationalism after Burma gained independence from British rule. Since then, the Mons and the Karens and other ethnic groups have fought for self-determination as free states as they were prior to the colonial period. General Aung San promised that ten years after Burma gained her independence from Britain, minority ethnic groups like the Mons and Karens could choose to separate from Burma and become free states with self-determination. This agreement was ratified by the Pang Laung Treaty, and the minority groups wanted the promise kept. The Mons, who took pride in the history of their great kingdom and civilization lost to Alaungphya, the Burmese king, when Pegu fell in 1757, also sought to re-establish Monland.

Symbols used in the Mons' invented traditions as well as the Mons' invented nation are congruent with Hobsbawm and Ranger's definition of invented tradition,

which says groups make use of old things in new situations so actions appear to have been repeated continually from the historic past. Mon invented traditions have been placed in an appropriate past. Their prophecy goes back to the time when Hongsawaddy, the Mons' capital mentioned in the Lord Buddha's prophecy, was founded, and their ancestors became the first Theravada Buddhists in Southeast Asia. The prophecy then carries on their history and projects a glorious future.

The symbol or sign of a golden swan mentioned in the Lord Buddha's prophecy is the origin of the name Hongsawaddy. It has been accepted as the signifier for the Mons and thus has been used as the emblem on the Mon national flag. It is said that the Burmese regime is opposed to the emblem of a flying swan since it signifies the motive for the Mons to fight for autonomy. Accordingly, the emblem of a standing swan is used instead on the flag of the Mon State. Furthermore, a replica of a standing swan has been constructed and housed on tall posts that are found in most Mon temples both in Thailand and Burma as Mon ethnic boundary markers.

According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, symbols and new instruments are invented as crucial parts of the patriotic movement of a nation state; namely, the national anthem and the national flag and the personification of the nation in the forms of symbols or images either formally or informally as in the case of the Mons in their diasporic communities. These people share symbolically and emotionally as members of their imagined or virtual nation. The significance of the universal symbols jointly held by the Mons are in agreement with Hobsbawm and Ranger, who cite Firth in *Symbols, Public and Private*:

The National Flag, the National Anthem and the National Emblem are the three symbols through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty, and as such they command instantaneous respect and loyalty. In themselves they reflect the entire background, thought and culture of a nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003: 11).

Practically, the Mons have fought to establish a free state in Burma by means of insurgent movements, especially the NMSP, which fought against the Tatmadaw for as long as 40 years before entering into a ceasefire with the Rangoon regime. The NMSP-SLORC/SPDC ceasefire has been widely criticized among Mon nationalist groups that claim the underlying reason for the leadership to agree to the ceasefire was to seek business opportunities for themselves rather than to protect Mon civilians who are still being oppressed by the Tatmadaw. Consequently, it is impossible for the Mons to found a free state, and they remain 'a people without a country' in the classic phrase of Robert Halliday, 'the father of Mon studies.' Consequently, a nation for the Mon is, in fact, their virtual or imagined community, and so they have created a number of traditions symbolically and emotionally shared by all the Mons in Burma, along the Thai-Burma border, in the Thai-Raman communities, and in their diasporic communities around the world because of their consciousness of the great civilization and history of their ancestors.

However, a critical observation made by South (2003: 40) is that Mon National Day and the creation of Mon patriotic elements

have been regarded as imperative by the NMSP elites rather than by Mon civilians in general.

Formal Mon Costumes

The Mon people in Wangka Village still appear to be firm in maintaining their ethnic identity, especially with overt signals or signs like dress, language, house form, and lifestyle. This is also true of their basic value orientation, the standards of morality and excellence by which every member of the community is evaluated (Barth, 1998: 14). For example, according to Robert Halliday,¹⁸ the typical Mon dress is basically quite indistinguishable from that of the Burmese. However, the Mons appear to be trying by color and pattern, if not by style of dress, to distinguish themselves from the Burmese. The men wear *saluing* and cover the upper part of the body with a shirt or a t-shirt for

¹⁸ Robert Halliday (1864-1933) has been characterized as 'the Father of Mon Studies.' His life story is little known. Even his time of residence in Amherst district of lower Burma as well as his travels to Siam has been reconstructed. He served as a missionary in Ye, a town in Burma. Some of his missionary activities were reported in an article published in 1927 in the *Baptist Missionary Review*. In his lifetime he had many contacts with scholars including George Coedes (1886-1969), Charles Otter Blagden (1864-1949), and Silawantathera (Shwe Nge). His published work consists of three books, namely *The Talaing* (1922), *The Mon – English Dictionary* (1922) and an edition and translation of *lik smin 'asah* (1923). Moreover, his translation of a chronicle, *Rajawan*, initially appeared as an article in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society (JBRS)* but was also released the same year as a monograph. Between 1913 and 1932, over a dozen of his articles were published in the *JBRS* and the *Journal of the Siam Society*. (Christian Bauer (ed.), 2000: IX-X).

everyday use, but for formal occasions men wear a red *saluing* with a white checked pattern to match a short white jacket with red checks on it. The *ganin* is worn by the women. There is a long-sleeved blouse to complete the costume. For special occasions women will wear a cotton or silk scarf over the shoulders. They also have formal costumes for special occasions consisting of red *ganin* and long-sleeved white blouses. When going to make merit at the monastery, elderly women usually dress in brown *ganin* and white cotton blouses with brown or white scarves over the shoulders to match. Moreover, Mon women usually have long hair twisted into a chignon at the back of the neck. Their hairstyle is quite different from that of Burmese women, who coil their hair a different way and put it more on the top of the head.¹⁹ However, this cannot be treated as a fixed rule since Burma consists of various ethnic groups, which are not easy to distinguish from one another (Paladising, 1983: 19).

During religious festivals young Mon women bear burdens on their heads and walk to the monastery in order to offer alms to the monks. They also cater there to their parents and senior relatives who stay overnight at the pavilion for laypersons in the monastery to meditate and pray together with other merit makers of their age.

From the author's informal interviews with the Mons in Wangka Village about Mon national costumes, three different answers were given. The first group of informants, who were about 45 years of age, said that they had first noticed the

Mon people wearing their national costumes when they were very young. Mon people in the village have donned their national costumes for the Mon National Day, for visiting the temple during the Songkran festival, for their wedding day, and even for the funerals of Mon elites, like the cremation of the late Nai Shwe Kyin in 2003 in Burma. The next answer given by one key informant was that there has been a general agreement about Mon dress among Mon cultural activists, who consist mainly of Mon university students from Rangoon and Mandalay who participated in a 1971 meeting with the primary goal of demonstrating the power of solidarity among Mon students and the secondary objective of being economical. This meeting was chaired by Professor Mong To while Nai Ong Mo acted as secretary.²⁰

Burmese leaders claim that minority peoples have been so well assimilated into the mainstream of Burmese society that it is hard for anyone to distinguish any cultural differences. This may be congruent with Hobsbawm and Ranger, who remark that traditions invented by private groups are different from those officially instituted and planned, and the latter are more easily traced because they are likely to be well documented (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003: 8).

However, one of the key informants went further, suggesting that Mon national costumes represent a merging of styles and patterns of ancient Mon handwoven cloth. Mon fabric has a variety of patterns and uses special weaving and embroidery techniques.

¹⁹ Interview with a Mon woman at Wangka Village in August 2, 2004.

²⁰ Interview with Nai Oc Pai Wongraman, a Mon cultural conservationist of Wangka Village on June 24, 2005.

In order to design their national costumes, Professor Mong To sent a team to conduct a fieldwork study in Mon localities and collect relevant data to be considered. Eventually, they came to the unanimous conclusion that a woman's costume consisted of a white, long-sleeved blouse and a red *ganin* with one edge embroidered and a scarf to match for special occasions like going to make merit at the temple. Men are to wear a red *saluing* with a white checked pattern to be matched with a shirt or a t-shirt covered with a jacket for special and formal occasions.

Formerly the Mons used natural dyes. For example, a red dye could be extracted from the bark of a particular kind of tree whereas a white tint came from the natural color of cotton yarn. The white checked patterns signified the paddy fields, because the Mons are proud that originally their ancestors were wet rice farmers.²¹

From my point of view, the Mon national costumes were invented in order to serve the Mon nationalistic ideology and show unity. Though the style of dress is virtually indistinguishable from that of the Burmese in general, by opting for particular colors and patterns the Mon show the distinctiveness of their ethnic identity and establish ethnic boundaries. Moreover, the Mon national outfits signify the main occupation of the Mon ancestors, who were wet rice farmers. And wet rice cultivation itself was a significant innovation in the formation of a *mandalic* state in Southeast Asia in ancient times.

²¹ Interview with Nai Oc Pai Wongraman on June 24, 2005.

Empirically, in order to come to a conclusion that the Mon national costumes were invented not more than 25 years ago (1971-2005), the researcher would like to cite the study by Halliday about Mon dress from one of his book, *The Talaing* which was published for the first time in 1917:

The dress worn by the Talaings in Burma is the ordinary Burmese dress. In that respect they are quite indistinguishable from the Burmese. The men wear a loin cloth, *glik*, consisting of a piece of narrow cloth, some eight yards long, sewn in two breadths without cutting. It is put round the body and fastened in with a twist at the waist, and the remaining part of it is gathered up in three folds and hung from the waist in front or simply thrown over the shoulder. Old men may be seen on cold mornings with the spare end worn round the shoulders as a shawl. The silk material for this garment is sometimes cut and made into two *saluings*. To make an ordinary *saluing*, a piece of cloth, some twenty-two inches wide and four and a half yards long, is woven. It is cut in two and the two breadths joined. The ends are then sewn together and the garment is complete. Cotton is used for work-day wear and silk for special occasions. The upper part of the body is covered with a short white cotton jacket or one of darker material. The head is covered with a bright coloured silk handkerchief put round and the ends tucked in as a turban (Halliday, 1999: 27).

Moreover, Halliday describes dress for Mon women as follows:

The *ganin* worn by the woman is formed just like the men's *saluings*, except that it has a broad band of a different pattern on the top and is somewhat smaller than the men's garment. A jacket of white or colored cotton or silk completes the costume. On festive occasions a bright silk scarf is worn over the shoulders. Very old women may sometimes be seen with an open *ganin* consisting of a piece of silk, almost square, made of two widths joined together. It is sometimes partly laced to keep it from opening too much in walking. Sandals or slippers are worn by both men and women (Halliday, 1999: 27).

Halliday in his 1917 work *The Talaing* noted that Mon dress was not distinctively different from that of the Burmese (Halliday, 1999: 27). Thus within the last thirty-five years (1971-2005) the Mon nationalist movements have attempted to find a mutual symbol that signifies solidarity by selectively using unique colors and patterns in their outfits to use as ethnic boundary markers. Moreover, the Mon national costumes are economical because they can be used on a variety of occasions. The Mon children who are descendants of the displaced Burmese people at Sangkhlaburi put on Mon national costumes to go to school every Friday as part of a cultural promotion campaign at the local level.

The invention of Mon national costumes is in accordance with Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept that ancient materials can be used 'to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003:

6). This is the case with the Mons, who have opted to use ancient patterns of handwoven cloth to invent national costumes to signify the uniqueness of the Mon people and to serve as ethnic boundary markers by their nationalist movements.

Conclusion

An analysis of Mon invented traditions shows that they are related to Mon nationalist movements and have been developed since Burma gained her independence from British rule in 1948. The Mons are proud of their kingdom, Hongsawaddy, and their long history. Nevertheless, during the colonial period in Burma the Mons did not initiate political movements or struggle for their autonomy. Only after the Karens started to fight for their political rights when Burma gained her independence in 1948 did the Mons, who were allied with the Karens, start to do so. The Mon political movements aimed at self-determination but were also based on nostalgic memories of their ancestors, the first group to settle in lower Burma, having the golden swan of the Lord Buddha's prophecy as their guiding light. Moreover, before the Burmans migrated into Burma, the Mons used to have a great civilization, a kingdom embracing a wide swathe of land that is under the sovereignty of Burma and Thailand nowadays. The Burmans have not only deprived the Mons of their kingdom but also of their culture their language and alphabet (Fredholm, 1993).²²

²² There is a popular song for Mon children telling how the Burmans forced the Mons to give them their alphabet, but only 33 letters were given to the oppressors, the Burmans.

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Accordingly, there are 33 letters in Burmese whereas there are 35 letters in Mon.

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