

From Moulmein in Myanmar to Sangkhla Buri in Thailand: An ethnographic study of a Mon village¹

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Abstract

The objectives of the study on “From Moulmein in Myanmar to Sangkhla Buri in Thailand: An ethnographic study of a Mon village” are to present the history, ways of living, changes and the present state of the displaced Mon people at Ban Wang-ka, Tambon Nonglu, Sangkhlaburi District, Kanchanaburi Province, and to offer some basic knowledge about and an understanding of the Mon ethnic group in Thailand. First, the study gives a brief general background of Kanchanaburi province, and of the Mon who came to Thailand during the mid-Ayuddhaya period and in the beginning of the Rattanakosin period and settled in the area. Second, the study records the oral history of migration of the Mon people from their own villages in Myanmar to Thailand from around the 1948 A.D. (2491 B.E.), reports the origins of the settlement at the Ban Wang-ka and their relationships with the nearby local people as well as reports the journey of Luang Pho Uttama, the most respected monk for all the Mons and other minority groups in the area. From a small community of about 60 households in 1948 the village now has about 1,000 families due to the continuous stream of refugees from Myanmar but they still experience difficult situations in Thailand. Even though the Wang-ka Mon are unsure of their status in becoming Thai citizens, they enjoy living in Thailand, hoping to spend their lives here, and have adapted Thai lifestyles. For example, the Mon children are enrolled in Thai schools in the village and in the Sangkhlaburi district, they speak Thai and have a daily life similar to Thai children. Finally, the problem of not being a Thai citizen and the problems caused by development and modernization, together with increasing tourism to the village in Kanchanaburi has led to changes within the community such as in changes to the physical environment, housings, facilities, and ways of living and thinking.

0. Introduction

The Mon people have had a long and difficult history in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, G. H. Luce, the specialist on Burma during the 11th to

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the 13th centuries asserted in his work **Old Burma, Early Pagan** (1969; and also cited in Guillon [1999:52]) that “The pioneers in civilization, both in Old Burma and Old Siam, were the Mons”. And on the other hand, P.Nop wrote about his “personal experience with the Mon, after having seen the Mon village burnt down with his own eyes,” wrote in the preface of his novel **Tangay: the Setting Sun of Ramanya** that “since Burma has secured her independence from England in 1948, several ethnic minorities within Burma have been fighting for their own independence. The struggle between the Mon, the oldest civilization in Southeast Asia, and the Burmese is much older, though.”

In this paper, the authors present findings from their recent study on the Mon community of Ban Wangka in Sangkhla Buri district of Kanchanaburi Province of Western Thailand. The purpose is twofold: first, to present the settlement of the Mon people in Ban Wangka; second, to describe the ways of living of the Mon at Ban Wangka, and to detail the efforts of the Mon to maintain their cultural identity and how they have adapted to changing social conditions. This study was conducted during the year 2001-2002. The authors and the MA Linguistics students were at Wangka Village for the first time in 1999. It was during this field trip for the “Field Methods Class” that the preliminary data about the village was gathered. After being granted financial support from the National Research Council of Thailand, the authors went back to Wangka to talk with villagers and local government officials. About 10 people of the first settlers or their descendants, who still lived in Wangka, were chosen as our resources. The oral history of why and how they decided to move to Thailand was tape-recorded. All of our informants can speak Thai to a certain degree. The authors went back to Wangka on and off for another 9-10 trips to observe ways of living and sometimes to participate in some religious ceremonies. The period of staying in the village varied from 5-9 days for each trip. Points to ask and questions to interview were noted and carried out on every trip. The local Thai officials at the local government bureau were very helpful in helping us with facts and figures of the Sangkhla Buri District, the Border-Patrol Police squad permitted us a short visit to have a brief look at the Ha-lok-kha-ni and Ban Ton-Yang Camps. Had the two authors had a little bit more courage, we might have travelled unofficially to Moulemein with the locals for Nai Swe Shin cremation. However, being Thai government officials, we decided against the idea. Basic facts about Kanchanaburi are presented first. Then the cause and the route of migration, the settlement, and some facts about Wangka are laid out respectively.

1. About Kanchanaburi

Kanchanaburi is the third largest province² in Thailand. It is about 129 kilometers from Bangkok and borders Myanmar to the west of Bangkok. Kanchanaburi is already best known to tourists as the site of plentiful natural resources and historic places. No less plentiful is the population of

²The first largest is Nakhon Ratchasima, the second is Chiang Mai and the third is Kanchanaburi.

Kanchanaburi which includes Thai, Karen, Mon, etc. Among these people who are Thai citizens, there are a variety of ethnic groups represented: Thai, Chinese, Lao, Karen, and Mon. And among the Karens and the Mons there are those who are Thai citizens, those who are immigrants, those who are refugees, those who are illegal cross-country laborers, those who are highlanders, etc. Sangkhla Buri, one of the thirteen districts of Kanchanaburi³, is located 220 kilometers from the municipal city of Kanchanaburi. It is the farthest district bordering Myanmar. That is to say, the major groups of population of Sangkhla Buri are Thais whose ancestors are Karens, who have been in the area for more than 200 years ago (80% of the population). The rest are Thai Mons, immigrant Mons, Karens in the high lands, and illegal cross-country laborers (15% of the population). And only 5% are Thai.

The Mon who settled in Kanchanaburi can be divided into two groups: 1) those who arrived before the late Ayuddhaya (1569-1767 in the mid-seventeenth century) and Thonburi-early Rattanakosin (1767-1782) period. These Mon are all Thai citizens now. They usually live in the districts of Thong Pha Phum, Sai Yok and Tha Maka⁴. 2) Those who have just moved in between 1949 and the present time. These people are classified as “minority people” by the Thai government. The minority people from Myanmar are sub-classified by the government as follows:

- 1) The Burmese nationals with Thai residence permits, who moved in from Myanmar before the 5th of March 1976⁵, after the forming of the Socialist Government of General Ne Win in March 1962. They have been granted temporarily stay. They hold **pink identification cards**. The cards have to be re-issued every 5 years. A card holder can go out of a permitted area with special permission from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
- 2) The Burmese nationals illegally smuggled into Thailand, who arrived from Myanmar after the 5th of March 1976. They hold **orange identification cards**. The cards have to be renewed every 5 years. A card holder cannot go out of the permitted area.
- 3) The Burmese national laborers who have come to Thailand as laborers and who live with their employers, and have been granted a temporarily stay. The stay has to be renewed every year by their employers. They hold **purple identification cards**.
- 4) Burmese Refugees who have fled from Myanmar’s long civil war against ethnic minorities. These people live in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, some are in Myanmar and some are in Thailand.

³The thirteen districts of Kanchanaburi are 1) Muang Kanchanaburi 2) Bo Phloi 3) Dan Makham Tia 4) Huai Krachao 5) Lao Khwan 6) Nong Prue 7) Phanom Thuan 8) Sai Yok 9) Sangkhla Buri 10) Si Sawat 11) Tha Maka 12) Tha Muang and 13) Thong Pha Phum

⁴See Sujaritlak Deepadung et als. (1995) for details of the movements and settlement of the Mon from Myanmar during the late Ayuddhaya and early Rattanakosin.

⁵The 5th of March 1976 was the date when the Ministerial Announcement of Interior was officially issued by the Ministry of the Interior.

- 5) The Burmese national students who fled from the 1988 civil war in Myanmar (the 8th of August 1988). These students used to stay in Maniiloy Camp in Ratchaburi Province, but after the Myanmar Embassy incident in Bangkok, they were moved to be with the fourth group above, i.e., Ban Ton-Yang Camp in Thong-Pha-Phum District of Kanchanaburi.

The first and the second groups are the Burmese nationals who reside in Sangkhla Buri and are waiting to be sent back to their homeland whenever peace is established in Myanmar. The second group is the one to be sent back first. They live scattered in Sangkhla Buri. The first group is the Mon who live in Ban Wangka, the village of this study.

After Myanmar gained its independence from the British in 1948 and after the death of General Aung San in 1947, all the ethnic minorities realized that they would never have their “identity and right of self-determination,” so they took up arms and started fighting.

2. The cause of immigrations into Thailand

Then, in 1962, after General Ne Win set up a military government, all the minority groups along the frontier states in Myanmar were suppressed. Various ethnic minority insurgent groups were to be found everywhere. Since then many peace-loving laypersons were made refugees by the fighting between the insurgent groups and the Myanmar army and among the insurgent groups themselves. Villagers who were suspected of aiding the various rebel groups against the Myanmar troops were forced into labor, tortured, beaten, sexually abused, etc. Those who were imprisoned usually ended up being executed without trial or charges.

Moreover, sometimes the Myanmar troops would relocate the whole village in new areas which were fenced and guarded. These new villages had to produce food for the troops in the area. If the villages were allowed to remain in their original locations, then they had to give most of their agricultural produce to the army. The villages have been looted from time to time and later destroyed. The villagers have become refugees, wandering in the jungle or moving across borders into nearby countries. This is the main reason for the coming of the Mon to Wangka, Sangkhla Buri District of Kanchanaburi Province, that is, they have been forced. The reason for the Myanmar nationals, or to be specific the Mon, to be pulled over the border into Thailand may be summarised as follows:

- 1) Along the Thai-Myanmar border area in the lower Myanmar region are the Mon State and the Karen State. Local people both on the Thailand side and on the Myanmar side used to go back and forth across the Thai-Myanmar border all the time. The mobility across the border was as common in the olden days as it usually is nowadays, not to mention the fact that in the past there was no such thing called a border line in any villager’s mind, as indicated by the following statements made by a man who now lives in Wangka and who travelled from his village in Myanmar to Thailand.

“When I came here in 1977/78, around this area, I went back and forth all the time, (I) came via Mok-ka-niang village, the birth place of Luang-pho Ut-ta-ma. From Mok-ka-niang, we had to go deep into the jungle, no road at all, we came together about 50 persons. I was by myself, some of us came as a family. All of us, 50 persons, were from Ko-dot village. The whole group increased to be about 200 persons when we reached Mok-ka-niang. I used to come here with my uncle, (we) came by an ox-cart caravan up till Thong Pha Phum, (we) came to sell things. I used to follow (him). That’s why I knew the direction.”

2) The generosity of the Thai people is well known among the Mons in Myanmar. The Mon in Myanmar also know that there are Mon people in Thailand, who came here since the late Ayuddhaya period and the early Rattanakosin period. And those who came at that time were welcomed by the Thai. Now they are all Thai citizens.

3) A better living condition in Thailand, is important to the Mons who have migrated to Thailand. To have a house or to own a piece of land in Myanmar is less important to them than to live a peaceful life, to speak their own language, to maintain their own culture and beliefs, and to be good Buddhists. In the words of an old man in Sangkhla Buri.

“At that time, there were robberies, sometimes by the Burmese, sometimes by the Mons, sometimes by the Karens. It was like a small war. It doesn’t matter how much we earned, they took all. When I was in Burma, I was terrified, at night we had to sleep in the jungle. There were a lot of soldiers, Burmese soldiers, Karen soldiers, Mon soldiers. Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma told us to come and live here, which was much better. (I) can stay here. Even if everything in Burma was O.K., I would not go back. It doesn’t matter how peaceful it is in Burma, I will not go back. There are no relatives there, there is only one nephew left. They took all our land, our house, everything.”

4) Thailand has a good economy compared to their own country. Because of Myanmar’s economic crisis, the central government taxes rice, cattle and any produce they can get from the people. Besides being taxed by the central government, they also have to give things to various insurgent troops and armies around their villages. One old man at Sangkhla Buri told us: “The area I stayed in, the village I lived in, it didn’t matter whether it were betel nut gardens, durian gardens, or rubber plantation gardens, which I used to plant, helping with my relatives, at present it was all seized by the Burmese. Now all is owned by the Burmese. Everything belongs to the Burmese, even though we planted everything with our own hands.”

5) Both the Mon and the Thai are Buddhists. The Mon people usually practice seriously as good Buddhists. It is a known fact, according to Guillon's words (1999:214) "... Mon civilization had the vigor to bring Buddhist thought to western Southeast Asia, adapting it to its own genius and to that of its neighbors, along with its unfulfillable demands and its incarnations in civil society."

6) The Thai government's flexible policy towards minority people. Most of the minorities who came across the border, except those with arms and drugs, and human-smuggler agencies, usually would get permits of some sort: either as a refugee in a camp, as a resident with Thai residence permits in certain local areas in Thai territories, as legal laborers with an employer's guarantee, or as an alien with an alien identification card.

3. Routes of migration

To travel from Myanmar into Thailand, or vice versa, especially into Kanchanaburi province, there is one well-known route which has been used both by the Myanmar and the Thai troops in historical battles, the Three Pagodas Pass. The Three Pagodas Pass is located in Thong Pha Phum district. It is now an official opening along the Myanmar-Thai border. The second route is along the Lau-lo Range and Ha-lok-kha-ni Camp Route. This route is in Sangkhla Buri district. The other less well-known and much more difficult routes are Ca-kae, Pa-ray-nok and Wia-ca-dy Routes. All of these are in Sangkhla Buri district.

4. The settlement at Wangka (bon), Sangkhla Buri District

The first group of the Mon who moved to settle in Sangkhla Buri came in 1948, the second group was in March 1949⁶, and the third group was in 1950. From then on, there were a lot of comings and goings, depending on the situation in Myanmar. The third group comprised about 40 households, so that all together, there were about 60 households. Some of them came via the Three Pagodas Pass, and some came through Ban Bi-khlii. They came from the villages of Mok-ka-niang, Chao-kha-le in Moulmein, and they first stopped over at Ban Ni-the, King-Amphoe Sangkhla Buri⁷. The head of the King-Amphoe at that time was named Mr. Charoen Wasanasuwan, and he gave permission for them to stay at Wangka (lang) "lower Wangka," which was a very dense forest with Karen people living here and there at the time.

Later on, upon the request of Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma, and also due to the fact that the area around the Amphoe office building was a thick forest, the

⁶Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma himself came from Mok-ka-niang Village, the District of Moulmein around 1945. He, together with one monk and five people, formed one set of the second group, they used the I-tong Route while the other set of the second group used the Wia-ca-dy Route. The two sets met at Wangka.

⁷At that time, Sangkhla Buri was a King-Amphoe (Sub-district) and it was upgraded to be an Amphoe (District) in 1901.

closest village to the Amphoe was about 5 kilometers away, he let the Mon settle down in the area opposite the Amphoe office building across the Songka-ria river. This area was called Wangka (bon) “the upper Wangka.”

The Wangka (bon) was formally on the plain between the mountain ranges, but when the Electricity Authority of Thailand (EGAT) started building Khao-Laem Dam in 1978, and then opened the dam in 1984, the whole area of the Amphoe office building, Ban Wangka (lang), Ban Wangka (bon) had to be moved to higher ground. The Mon of the Wangka (bon) had to move to a new high-land area which belonged to the Sangha, i.e., the location of the Wangka (bon) nowadays is owned by Wat Wang-wi-we-ka-ram and from now on referred to as Wat Wang for short.⁸

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand did not compensate people living in any land area or the cost of moving the Mon at Ban Wangka (bon) because they are not Thai citizens. EGAT gave a piece of land to Wat Wang, so Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma gave permission to the Mon to build their own houses on the temple’s property. Now the Mon at Wangka (bon) have only a piece of land large enough for building a house but no cultivation area to grow rice or to raise cattle. On one side of the area is the great reservoir of Khao Laem, on the other side is a mountain range of preservation forest area.

5. About Wangka (bon)

5.1 *The village*

Amphoe Sangkhla Buri consists of three tambons: 1) Tambon Nong-luu, 2) Tambon Plang-phle and 3) Tambon Lay-wo. The Amphoe Sangkhla Buri office building is in Tambon Nong-luu, and it is located on the east side of Khao Laem Lake. The side of the area is usually called “Wangka (lang) – The lower Wangka” or “Wangka fang Thai – The Thai side of Wangka.” On the opposite side of the lake, or on the west side, is “Wangka (bon) – The upper Wangka” or “Wangka fang Mon – The Mon side of Wangka.” From here on the shortened name “Wangka” will be used in referring to Wangka (bon), the area of this study.

The two sides are joined by the renowned wooden bridge called “Saphan-Ut-ta-ma-nu-sorn – The commemoration of Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma Bridge,” in honor of Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma, who was the mastermind and engineer in constructing this bridge.

At present, the population of Wangka is about 1,000 households or approximately 10,000 people, all of whom have migrated from Ye, Moulmein, Mudon, Thaton, etc. in Myanmar. The people of Wangka speak the Mon

⁸Wat Wang-wi-we-ka-ram is abbreviated as Wat Wang. Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma and the Mon at Wangka helped build this temple for the Mon in the village, so they did not have to cross the river to make merit at the Karen temple near the Amphoe office building. Moreover, it is an accepted practice that where there is a Mon community, there is a Buddhist temple.

language with the Moulmein dialect⁹. Linguistically, the Mon language is in the Mon-Khmer branch of Mon-Khmer group in the Austroasiatic language family. Most of the adults of the Wangka can also speak Burmese, or at least understand Burmese, while all the children who were born in Thailand can speak both Thai and Mon.

The Wangka village is like a small up-country town equipped with a local market place, a school and a cinema¹⁰. There is also a big, well-known temple, namely, Wat Wang of Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma. Tourists usually go to the temple to pay respect to Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma and to get blessing from him. The Wangka village itself is also a tourist attraction in which one can see the ways of living, and the long wooden bridge¹¹ which joins the Mon side of Wangka and the Thai side of Wangka (lang).

Moreover, the old Wat Wang chapel and the old bell tower underneath the water in the lake are presently being promoted as “Unseen Thailand,” the underwater world of Sangkhla Buri by the Tourist Authority of Thailand. This old Wat Wang was originally built by Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma and the Mon with the help from the Karen in 1956 in the old village area. It was flooded when the dam was fully opened in 1984¹².

5.2 *Ways of living*

The Mon are Buddhists. They always observe major Buddhist religious events. Most of the elders go to the temple each Buddhist Day. Each morning at least one person from each house will line up on the stretch leading from Wat Wang to the locals’ living quarters to offer cooked rice to the monks. Then, later in the day each household takes turns in cooking and delivering meals to the temple.

The Mon at Wangka earn their living as employees in the factories in Wangka (lang), employees in resorts and restaurants along the Khao Laem Lake, as fishermen catching fish in the lake, or souvenir merchants selling souvenirs at Wat Wang to the tourists. There is no space for rice cultivation or cattle raising in Wangka. However, the Mon are very efficient and hard-working people. They lead a very simple life, so they save up much of what they earn.

⁹According to the Mon people at Wangka, there are three dialects of the Mon language in Myanmar, they can tell the distinction by the different pronunciation of the word “to eat”: 1) if a person pronounces it as [ʃiaʔ] s/he is from Moulmein, which is called “the Central Mon”; 2) if a person pronounces it as [ciaʔ], s/he is from Rangoon, which is called “Pasim Mon”; and 3) if a person pronounces it as [ciʔ], s/he is from Pegu, which is called “Pagan Mon”. The Mon written language is derived from early Indian scripts.

¹⁰The cinema is now deserted due to the fact that every household has its own television set and a video-player, or even a satellite disk.

¹¹This wooden bridge was built by the labor of the Mon and the Karen. The idea of building this wooden bridge was originated by Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma to help facilitate the inter-movement of the two groups of people.

¹²The old temple and the bell tower can be seen during the low tide season, when the water in the lake is low, in late April to May.

The Mon at Wangka still practice the ceremonial cycles, most of which are just like what they did when they were in Myanmar, but on a reduced scale. The two most important occasions are Songkran (the traditional New Year in mid-April) and Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma's birthday (in late February on Early March). Other ceremonial cycles include:

- 1) the Wi-sa-kha-bu-cha day (the commemoration of the Lord Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death in May),
- 2) the ordination of young men (usually in June), the Buddhist Lent (the three-month period for the Buddhist monks to remain in their monasteries overnight to renew spiritual vigor) and for laymen to abstain from all the bad things in July,
- 3) the giving of extra support to the monastery (in terms of financial, physical and necessities in August),
- 4) the offering of honey to the monks (the Mon originally believed that honey is an important ingredient of traditional medicines) and the floating of the boat to get rid of the past year's troubles and bad omens (both ceremonies in September),
- 5) the end of the Buddhist Lent Day (when they go to the temple in the morning and "tak-bat-dok-mai – offer flowers, incense and candles to the monks" in the afternoon – in October),
- 6) the tot-ka-thin an annual religious festival, following the rainy season, during which new robes are presented to the monks in November,
- 7) the offering of agricultural produce after the harvest season to the monks in December,
- 8) the month for all the monks to take part in Pali examination, it is the time for laymen to give extra support to the monks in January,
- 9) the offering of a special dish of rice to the monks, i.e., the ya-ku cooked rice made of sticky rice, black peppers, ginger roots, beans, sesame oil, salt, sugar, and fresh coconut in February.

The ceremonial events come to a complete cycle during Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma's birthday celebration in late February or early March.¹³

5.3 Local administrative and village leaders

With the population of about 10,000, the Wangka village is under the Thai local administration, just like other local Thai villages, with a "Kamnan" who is the head of a Tambon. He lives in Wangka (lang) close to the Amphoe Office Building, i.e., he is a Thai of mixed Karen and Laos ethnicity. He has one assistant called "phu yai ban" who lives in Wangka village and he is a Thai of Mon ethnicity. This phu yai ban has 4 assistants, two for the administrative work and two for the law enforcement work. However, there is also a body of Mon leaders who are selected by all of the villagers. This group of people usually consists of some of the Mons who are descendants of the first group of settlers and some who are elders. Their function is to help settle small disputes among the villagers, or to give advice on various decisions. According to one of the leaders, the most important thing at hand is:

¹³The exact dates of all these events depend on the lunar calendar.

We would like very much to have all our kids who were born in Thailand, at Wangka, to gain their Thai citizen status. Even though some of us already got our Thai identification cards, we still worry about our kids. Most of them are teenagers now and there are a lot more to come; they were born here, they speak Thai, they go to Thai school, but they cannot go on with their study after they have finished high school from the Wat Wang school¹⁴. They cannot apply for a job outside Sangkhla Buri district. Then lots of parents say why we bother to send them to school. These kids do not know a thing in Myanmar, how can they survive if they are sent back to Myanmar. If they are here in Wangka with no status, and cannot go anywhere outside Wangka, there is no place to stay and no job to do. They are going to create lots of problems, then it is not solely our problem, these are going to be problems for the whole Sangkhla Buri and finally these will become national problems.

The most important person who is the heart and soul of all the Mon at Wangka is the great abbot Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma. He is known among the Mon and the Thai as always being a great dedicated Buddhist monk. He helps people with no discrimination. He helped the Thai, the Mon, the Karen, and even the Burmese nationals alike.

5.4 Houses

From their appearance, the houses of the Mon who came to settle here in the 1950's are just like the houses of the local Thais since most of the earlier settlers already have their Thai identification cards, i.e., they are legal Thai citizens. The houses of those who came later are usually built with slit bamboo for walls and floors, and thatch grass or big leaves for roofs, almost all belong to Burmese nationals with Thai residence permits. However, whether it is a big wooden house or a small bamboo house, there is one identical dominant feature, that is, each house in Wangka has an elevated altar for the Buddha image. This altar looks like an extension of the house. The reason for this is to prevent the altar from shaking when residents of the house walk or do their routine household chores. The Mon are serious Buddhists, so they pay respect to the Lord Buddha image every morning and evening, and they usually put flowers and a glass of water up in front of the Buddha image, they believe it is a sin if the water they offer the Lord Buddha spills out.

5.5 Social relationships

When the Mon first arrived in Sangkhla Buri around 1950, they were allowed to settle at Wangka (lang) through the hospitality of the Karen and the

¹⁴There are a lot of conditions imposed on those who are classified as minorities. As a Burmese national with Thai temporary permission of staying at Wangka with the pink card, they can go to school only at Wat Wang school or the school at the Amphoe. If they want to further their study outside Sangkhla Buri District, they have to submit official requests to the Ministry of the Interior. They have to go over the same procedure, if they need to go to the hospital, or to go to work outside Sangkhla Buri.

Thai “Nay Amphoe – District head official.” The first group of the Mon of about 60 households who lived here were paid for their labor with rice. They looked after the Amphoe office building and its vicinity. Also, because of the charitable work that Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma did for the Mon, the Karen and the Thai, and because of the respect they all have for Luang Pho, the Wangka (bon) was established. The Karen at Wangka (lang) are Thai because they have been here for almost two hundred years, while some of the first settlers of the Mon at Wangka are Thai, but most of the Mon are Myanmar nationals with the permit to stay in Thailand till there is peace in Myanmar. At that time they will have to be sent back.

It has been more than fifty years now, and the peace in Myanmar is long overdue. The Mon born in Thailand have grown up, with more on the way. They have gone to Thai schools, learned the Thai language, but they cannot leave Wangka to further their studies. The farthest they may go to school or to work is the municipal Kanchanaburi province, but they must have official permission from the Minister of Interior via the Amphoe administration. To stay in the village after finishing elementary Wat Wang school or the high school in the Amphoe, i.e., U-dom-sit-suk-sa school, means they go to school for nothing, because there is no job available in Sangkhla Buri district, except wage-labor jobs, fishing in the Khao Laem Lake, or selling souvenirs to tourists, etc. However, to grow up with no proper education in school is even worse. For those whose parents can afford the Thai citizenship for them, either by buying the Thai identification cards from officials, or by paying money to the Thai to adopt their kids, or by getting married into a Thai family, or by adopting the false identification card of the deceased people, etc., there is hope. However, hope comes with payment, not to mention the amount of money that their parents have to pay. They have to live with fear that one day their identification cards may be taken away. They have lost their dignity, they have to do whatever the person who gave their identification cards asks them to do. Meanwhile, those kids whose parents cannot afford the Thai citizenship for them or whose parents do not want to commit a crime of bribery, have to live their life at Wangka and may create problems.

New technologies, such as radio, television, video-movie, cable TV, karaoke, motorcycle, mobile phone, etc., have come very quickly into Wangka. It is a tourist attraction spot, there is a concrete highway straight from the Amphoe to the village and to Wat Wang, with coffee houses, guest houses, resorts, restaurants, bamboo-house rafts, etc. All these help alleviate problems for the kids and the whole village alike. Moreover the Mon youngsters fight the Thai youngsters, and both sides take revenge on each other¹⁵. Drinking, motorcycle racing and fighting come together, just like what

¹⁵In the olden days, when there were not many people at Wangka, the Mon at Wangka obeyed the four rules set up by Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma, which were: 1) do not drink alcoholic drink; 2) do not gamble; 3) do not steal; and 4) do not get involved with other people's wife or husband. When the community got bigger, to enforce the four rules has seemed very difficult. In addition, Luang Pho himself has gotten older and he is not in good health. And since the situation in Myanmar has not gotten better, more people are coming to the village from Myanmar, and so enforcing the four rules has become impossible.

happens in any other Thai village. Most of the Mon teenagers do not feel like speaking the Mon language any more. They feel ashamed of their own identity.

That is why in the village there is a Mon Youth Cultural Center which has been set up for the kids; it offers lessons on Mon traditional dance, and Mon musical instrument rehearsal. For the kids who have no parents, or whose parents cannot afford formal education for them, there is non-formal education with teaching Mon writing system and also other subjects offered at Wat Wang.

When the Mon were just situated at Wangka, they were on good terms with the Karen/Thai at Wangka (lang). The Wooden Bridge was first built across the Song-ka-ria River to strengthen the brotherhood of the Mon and the Karen/Thai. Song-ka-ria River – a river by its name, but in fact it is not that big a river, as you can still recognise the person on the other end of the bridge. The length of the bridge was not as long as it is at present. The Mon and the Karen/Thai were so close, they were just like next-door neighbors. Nowadays, it is built across the Khao Laem Lake, a vast body of water, so you can hardly see the person on the other end of the bridge. The relationship of the Mon at Wangka and the Karen/Thai at Wangka (lang) is also drifting apart.

In order to try to bridge this relationship, some important religious events will be practiced on a turn-taking system; that is, one year it is hosted by Wat Wang in Wangka (the Mon side), and the next year it will be hosted by one of the wats ('temple') in Wangka (lang) (the Karen/Thai side).¹⁶ Also, during the seven days of Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma's birthday celebration at Wat Wang, there are a lot of activities among the Mon and the Karen/Thai: Mon traditional dance, Karen traditional dance, traditional Muay-Thai 'kick boxing', etc.

The Mon also feel inferior to the Karen/Thai, because all the Karen at Wangka (lang) are Thai citizens, but most of the Mons at Wangka are not. "For the security reason" is always given as the major reason for not granting them citizenship. Some of the Karens who just came into Thailand can get identification cards very easily, provided that they know the right persons and they can get recommendations from the Karen leaders who are Thai and can prove that they were in Thailand for a certain period of time.

In answer to the question "why doesn't Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma help the Mon at Wangka?" Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma is reported by one of the elders at Wangka to have said:

"Now Luang Pho doesn't want to say anything. He said "one is up to one's Kamma". He said to the officials that "anyone who can do anything, do it, if it is legal, do it. He himself doesn't want to interfere, (he) doesn't want to say anything, (he) doesn't want to talk about it anymore."

¹⁶There are two 'wats' (temples) in Wangka (lang) originally built by the older Karen. They are Wat Sri Suwan and Wat Somdej.

“He certainly worries about the ‘young generations’, how to earn their living, where to live their life. He told them to lead a good life¹⁷; if they are good, one day the Thai government will grant them the status.”

No one knows whether or when Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma’s wish will come true. For the Mon at Wangka, both adults and children, they still behave to a certain degree as good persons so as to thank the Thai people for the land where they have sought to live their peaceful life. If the Thai government lets the problem go on as it is, with the kids growing up without hope, this will create more difficult and greater problems for the whole nation, not only for Wangka village or for Amphoe Sangkhla Buri¹⁸.

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¹⁷Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma got his Thai citizenship on the 22nd of March 1983, about 30 years after he first came to Thailand. He does not interfere with the citizenship requests for the Wangka Mon, not even for the kids who were born in Thailand because he himself was accused by some Mon patriots of motivating all the Mon in Myanmar to leave their homeland to stay in Thailand.

¹⁸By the time that this article was published, Luang Pho Ut-ta-ma had passed away on October 18th, 2006. And the first batch of about 500 persons of the Mon of Wangka got their Thai identification cards in March 2006, while about 1,800 persons were in the process of being granted the cards. All of them were granted with permission to be proper Thai citizens by the resolution of the Cabinet on the 18th of October 2005.