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The historical vicissitudes of the *Vessantara Jataka* in mainland Southeast Asia

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Across the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, the Vessantara Jataka *has long been the most famous of the stories (jatakas) of the previous lives of the Buddha. However, little attention has been paid to the jataka's historical vicissitudes. Drawing on comparisons with neighbouring Thailand, this essay suggests there have been significant differences in the jataka's performances and interpretations in Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia and Laos. This essay seeks to historicise understandings of the* Vessantara Jataka*, showing how social movements, state policies and global pressures have shaped understandings of the jataka differently in each country.*

The *Vessantara Jataka* is widely known as the most famous of the 547 stories (*jatakas*) of the previous lives of the Buddha in the Pali Canon. In each jataka, the Buddha is reborn in a variety of animal, human and semidivine forms, perfecting a virtue he will need in order to reach enlightenment. Emphasis is placed on the final ten jatakas in which the future Buddha perfects the virtues of renunciation, courage, loving-kindnesss, resolution, wisdom, perseverance, forbearance, equanimity, truthfulness and generosity, respectively. As noted historian of religion Frank E. Reynolds summarises, 'Within the entire history of religions there is no sacred biography which has had a wider dissemination or made a greater impact.'[1]

Of all the hundreds of jatakas, the Buddha's incarnation as Prince Vessantara is considered to be the most important and is highlighted as his penultimate birth. Eminent Buddhologist Steven Collins suggests that this story is 'better known in Buddhist cultures than even the story of Gotama Buddha's own life'.[2] In this jataka, often called 'The Great Life', the future Buddha perfects the virtue of charitable giving

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1 Frank E. Reynolds, 'The many lives of Buddha: A study of sacred biography and Theravada tradition', in *The biographical process*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 37.
2 Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities: Utopias of the Pali imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 333.

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or generosity, giving away possessions, a magical elephant, and ultimately, his wife and two children. Carvings and paintings of the jataka, the earliest dating back to the second century BCE, have been found across Asia, from India and China to Sri Lanka, Indonesia and mainland Southeast Asia. Unlike elsewhere in Asia where the story has largely faded into obscurity, the *Vessantara Jataka* has remained a living tradition throughout the Theravada Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia, namely in Sri Lanka, Burma (today known as Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.[3]

But if there is widespread agreement that the *Vessantara Jataka* is important, remarkably little attention has been paid to its historical vicissitudes. Most early studies of the *Vessantara Jataka* were undertaken by scholars of religion. Consequently attention has centred on the Pali text, in part because of the assumption that it is the most authentic and because scholars did not believe that local texts differed significantly from the canonical version. Thus Margaret Cone and Richard Gombrich introduce their translation as 'the basic one', adding 'local versions are derived more or less directly from it, and do not innovate'.[4] Similarly, Donald Swearer writes, 'The Vessantara Jataka has been translated into the major Southeast Asian vernacular languages with minor changes in the text.'[5] However, a new body of scholarship is emerging which is beginning to suggest important differences in the interpretations and performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* across Southeast Asia, most notably in the volume edited by Steven Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*.[6] Much of this research has centred on regional variation within Thailand.[7] Drawing on

3 For a notable exception, see Christoph Emmrich, 'Vessantara opts out: Newar versions of the Tale of the Generous Prince', in *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, ed. Steven Collins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 183–209.

4 Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The perfect generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist epic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. xli.

5 Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 34; see also Collins, *Nirvana*; Elizabeth Lyons, 'A note on Thai painting', in *The arts of Thailand: A handbook of the architecture, sculpture and painting of Thailand (Siam)*, ed. Theodore Robert Bowie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 167; Patrick Jory, 'A history of the *Thet Maha Chat* and its contribution to a Thai political culture' (PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 1996), p. 24; Sarah Shaw, trans., *The Jatakas: Birth stories of the Bodhisatta* (New Delhi and New York: Penguin, 2006), p. lii.

6 Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*.

7 See for example, Arthid Sheravanichkul, 'To compensate bad karma, to help those who suffer: A Mon manuscript and "narratives" on Jujaka amulets', paper presented at the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists 14th International Conference, Dublin, 18–21 Sept. 2012; Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson, with Craig J. Reynolds, Hong Lysa, Pasuk Phongpaichit, Patrick Jory and Ruth T. McVey (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2005[1982]); Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, with Wajuppa Tossa, *Buddhist storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012); Manee Phayomyong, *Kaanwikhroh lae priabthiab mahaachaat chabab phaak klang, phaak nya, phaak isaan lae phaak tai* [Analysis and comparison of the Mahachat of the central, northern, northeastern and southern regions] (Mahabandit thesis, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, 1976); Pathom Hongsuwan, '*Hae Taa Chuchok*' [Parading Grandfather Jujaka], in *Naan maa laew: Mii ryang lao nithaan tamnaan chiwit* [Long ago: Telling tales of life] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2013), pp. 269–307; Prakong Nimmanhaeminda, *Mahaachaat Laanaa: Kaansyksaa nai thaana thii ben waanakhadii thohngthin* [The Lanna Mahachat: A study from the perspective of local culture] (Bangkok: Munithi khrongkaan damraa sangkhomsaat lae manusayasaat, 1983); Sommai

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secondary sources, interviews, and observations of jataka recitations, my own recent work has highlighted significant regional differences in frequency, calendrical timing, duration, number of monks, selection of lay sponsors, types of processions, key symbols, and key chapters, as well as differences in interpretations of the major characters' actions across central, northeastern and northern Thailand. For instance, Jujaka, the beggar to whom Vessantara gives his two children, was portrayed as a frightening embodiment of evil in the nineteenth-century central Thai court renditions; as a more ambivalent vaudevillian figure in contemporary northeastern performances; and as a beloved comic trickster in northern performances. These portrayals of Jujaka cover a political spectrum from pro-royalist agendas to anti-royalist critiques. Furthermore, as Thailand changes from a feudal to a capitalist society, Jujaka, once widely portrayed as a symbol of unrestrained greed, is increasingly being understood as a symbol of success, given his ability to attract wealth, a young wife, and Vessantara's children. The jataka once understood as a story about generosity is transforming into a story about acquisition; in the process it is gaining new roles in the promotion of wealth, cultural heritage, and tourism.[8]

In researching the *Vessantara Jataka* in Thailand, I was struck by how little has been written on its vicissitudes elsewhere in the Theravada Buddhist world, due in part to the strength of the prevailing scholarly paradigm and to the difficulties in conducting anthropological research in many of these countries. Consequently, in this essay I draw on my previous research in three regions of Thailand to offer preliminary comparisons with the jataka's interpretations and performances in Burma, Cambodia and Laos.[9] Based on secondary sources, these preliminary comparisons are hardly definitive; they are merely intended to facilitate and encourage more in-depth research. I divide my discussion of each respective country into two sections. In the first section I highlight what appear to be significant differences with Thailand in the life of the *Vessantara Jataka* in each neighbouring country, according to the available late nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts. Due to the limitations of these sources, these country summaries are minimising likely internal regional diversity. I then suggest how state policies and global pressures have broadly shaped interpretations and performances of the jataka differently in each country.

Premchit and Pierre Doré, *The Lan Na twelve-month traditions: An ethno-historic and comparative approach* (Chiang Mai: Faculty of Social Sciences, 1991).

8 Katherine A. Bowie, 'Jujaka as trickster: The comedic monks of northern Thailand', in Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, pp. 100–121; Katherine Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas: The politics of humor in the* Vessantara Jataka *in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

9 Similar studies for Sri Lanka and elsewhere remain to be undertaken. Although this essay emerges from the research I conducted in Thailand, the *Vessantara Jataka* performances in Thailand should not be presumed to have especial importance. Nonetheless the possibility remains that the jataka was particularly important in northern Thailand, given that some 50 additional 'apochryphal' jatakas (*paññasa jataka*) which are not part of the 547 jataka in the Pali Canon have been found in this region. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab also suggested that the jataka of the central Thai region originally came from northern Thailand. Damrong Rajanubhab, Preface, *Mahaaphon kham chieng kap Mahaaphon khwaam Phra Thepmoli, Klin* [The Mahaphon kham chieng (northern) version and the Mahaphon of Phra Thepmoli (Klin)] (Bangkok: Cremation volume for Khun Rachaphichitr [Jui Krisnaamara]; Sophonphiphattanakon Press, 1919). Prakong Nimmanhaeminda notes that some 120 versions have been found in northern Thailand, some arguably over 300 years old (*Mahaachaat Laanaa*, p. 7).

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Burma: Celebrating mothers

Numerous sources assure us that the *Vessantara Jataka* (Wethandaya Wuthu) was very popular in Burma. Writing of the 1960s, Melford Spiro notes that 'the story of Prince Vessantara is probably the best known and most loved of all Buddhist stories'.[10] In Burmese, the 'Ve' in Vessantara (*Wethandaya*) has the same sound and meaning for 'distribute' (pronounced *wei*), thereby further reinforcing the link between the jataka and charity.[11] When compared with Thai performances, five intriguing differences emerge, namely: in terms of the performers, the location of performances, the timing of performances, the importance of motherhood as a key symbolic element, and the apparently widespread usage of mazes. A discussion of how British colonialism and Burmese independence movements appear to have significantly shaped jataka performances over the course of the twentieth century concludes this section on the *Vessantara Jataka* in Burma.

Of monks and laity

Overall, the most distinctive aspect of Burmese performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* is the relative lack of direct participation by monks. In Thailand, religious performances of the jataka invariably involve monks, chanting in an operatic format which takes considerable time to learn. There, the *Vessantara Jataka* is typically chanted twice in any given performance, once in Pali and again in the local vernacular. By contrast, although they included jataka stories in their sermons, I found no evidence of Burmese monks chanting the jataka. It seems to have been performed primarily by theatre troupes comprised of live actors or marionettes at *zat pwes* or 'jataka festivals'.[12] As Spiro summarises, the jataka is '[a]lluded to frequently in conversation, recounted repeatedly in sermons, and — even more important — regularly enacted in dramatic form as part of the standard fare of the itinerant Burmese repertory groups'.[13]

These dramatic lay performances drew crowds of thousands. A mid-twentieth century account by Mi Mi Khaing describes how at night whole families, 'including grandmothers and young children, arrived with pillows, fans, goblets of drinking water and things to eat' as vendors sold 'pickled tea and jujube plums, both of which have the effect of keeping one awake'.[14] The atmosphere was often rather bacchanalian, lasting throughout the night, replete with gambling and liquor. In the early

10 Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 108; see also John Palmer Ferguson, 'The symbolic dimensions of the Burmese sangha' (PhD diss., Cornell University, Ithaca, 1975), p. 19; Max Ferrars and Bertha Ferrars, *Burma* (London: Low, Marston & Co., 1900), p. 173; Charles J.F.S. Forbes, *British Burma and its people: Being sketches of native manners, customs and religion* (London: John Murray, 1878), p. 149; Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese family* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1956[1946]), p. 102; Manning Nash, *The golden road to modernity: Village life in contemporary Burma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 114, 148, 295; Shway Yoe [pseud., henceforth George Scott], *The Burman: His life and notions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963[1882]), pp. 215, 221, 294.

11 Tharaphi Than, personal communication, email, 31 Jan. 2014.

12 This impression is confirmed by Tharaphi Than, email, 31 Jan. 2014; Patrick Pranke, email, 17 Feb. 2014; Alicia Turner, email, 6 Feb. 2014.

13 Spiro, *Buddhism and society*, p. 108.

14 The troupes of Po Sein and Sein Gadon are mentioned as the most popular. For fuller discussion, see Khaing, *Burmese family*, p. 103; C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese enchantment* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1916), pp. 10, 105–7; Scott, *The Burman*, p. 168.

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twentieth century Major C.M. Enriquez observed a crowd of four to five hundred men, including monks, gambling.[15] George Scott (writing as Shway Yoe), provides a description of a *pwe* with a marionette troupe at a Mon temple in Rangoon in the late nineteenth century:

> The people sit round about in a dense crowd, smoking and chewing betel, many of the young men strolling about and flirting in the impromptu bazaar which some business-like girls have started. This goes on till daylight, the audience alternately sleeping and looking on and applauding. At early dawn, the offerings are made to the *yahans* [monks], and all crowd to the shrine to recite their sentences in praise of the Lord Buddha. After breakfast there is more gossip and conversation with friends. A few of the old people listen to the reading and expounding of the Law by the superior of the monastery, but the young continue the amusements of the day before.[16]

Of temples and homes

Throughout Thailand, recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka* by monks typically occur in the temple (*wat*). In Burma, by contrast, *zat pwes* are performed outside of the temple grounds, albeit often in immediate proximity. Although not formally chanted in temples, I did encounter evidence of individual Burmese monks telling the story at the homes of laity. As Scott writes:

> In order to prepare themselves worthily for the Wa [Buddhist Lent], the wealthier people often call in the more learned yahans to deliver exhortations in their houses. Numbers of relations and friends are invited, who bring presents for the holy man in the hopes of sharing the merit of the transaction. Portions of the holy books usually are read on these occasions, especially the much-admired Wethandaya Wuttu.[17]

In Thailand, the only occasions I encountered of jataka recitations outside temple grounds nowadays are in northern Thailand, where a single chapter might be performed at a funeral by an individual monk in the family's home. However, the Burmese practice appears to have more in common with the now defunct custom in central Thailand when a novice's parents would host a recitation at home, at which their ordained son would chant a chapter. Apparently once quite common in the central region, by 1892, G.E. Gerini writes 'its observance is limited to a few of the noblest and wealthiest families of the realm'.[18]

Charles Forbes provides an account of a jataka telling at a Burmese temple in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but in this case the storyteller is not a monk, but

15 C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese loneliness: A tale of travel in Burma, the southern Shan States and Keng Tung* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1918), pp. 23, 86.

16 Scott, *The Burman*, pp. 215–16.

17 Ibid., pp. 221.

18 G.E. Gerini, *A retrospective view and account of the origin of the Thet Maha Ch'at ceremony* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 1976 [1892]), p. 34; see also Lucien Fournereau, *Bangkok in 1892*, trans. and introduced Walter E.J. Tips (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998 [1894]); Ernest Young, *The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe: Being sketches of the domestic and religious rites and ceremonies of the Siamese* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982[1898]), pp. 336–7; Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*.

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a lay elder. On holy days during Buddhist Lent (also called the Rains Retreat, circa July to October), the devout slept overnight at the temples. In the morning, they offered food to the monks. After the monks have left, 'Sometimes an Elder will assemble a group round him in the zayat [sala], and read from one of the sacred writings, one of the "Jatakas"'.[19]

Timing: Buddhist Lent

In the north and northeast of Thailand, it is considered inappropriate to perform the *Vessantara Jataka* during Buddhist Lent. In northeast Thailand, recitations invariably occur during Bun Phawet (circa March) and in northern Thailand they can take place during Yii Paeng (circa November), Boi Luang temple festivals, and funerals; only in the central region do recitations occur during Lent. In Burma, there seems to have been no fixed time for *Vessantara Jataka* performances; instead theatre troupes would be hired for a variety of celebrations throughout the year.[20] Such occasions included pagoda festivals, house-warmings, funerals, the ear-piercing ceremonies for daughters, and the ordinations of novices.[21] Both Scott and Forbes mention jataka performances during Buddhist Lent.[22] The *Vessantara Jataka* appears to have been most closely associated with Thawthalin, a festival apparently observed only in Pegu in Lower Burma, and Thadingyut; these dates correlate with Wan Sart and Wan Thaewo, respectively, when the jataka was often performed in central Thailand.[23]

Tawthalin occurs during Lent (Burmese sixth month, circa September). Max and Bertha Ferrars hint at the association of this festival with the jataka in Pegu in their late nineteenth-century description:

> The tawthalin offerings are distinguished by being in thousands, one thousand little cakes, one thousand plantains, and so on. The number one thousand is said to be symbolical of the thousand gata or stanzas of the Wethandaya zat.[24]

A website describes this festival at the Manuha Pagoda in Bagan:

> Monks from many monasteries are invited and alms bowls full of food are offered to them in the morning of the Full Moon Day. During the festival, the Myinkaba villagers march a parade with representation of the Jataka tales of the lives of Buddha. Most of the young villagers would take part in the roles of the king, queens and other characters.[25]

Thadingyut falls before the end of Buddhist Lent (Burmese seventh month, circa October). Like Wan Thaewo in Thailand, Thadingyut commemorates the Buddha's

19 Forbes, *British Burma*, p. 171.

20 My thanks to Tharaphi Than, email, 31 Jan. 2014.

21 *Burmese monk's tales*, ed. and trans. Maung Htin Aung (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 35; Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, p. 175.

22 Scott, *The Burman*, p. 221; Forbes, *British Burma*, p. 171.

23 Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and other essays on Thai Studies* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development; Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1986), p. 69.

24 Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, p. 186.

25 Bamboo Travel and Tours, 'Festivals in Tawthalin', Sept. 2011, http://www.bambootravelmyanmar.com/?p=125 (last accessed 26 Sept. 2017).

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descent back to earth after he went into the heavens to preach to his mother and other celestial beings at the Sulemani pagoda. It is also known as Abhidhamma Day, in reference to the Buddha's teachings.[26] Thadingyut is also a time when people express their gratitude to their elders with gifts.[27]

Of mothers and milk

In Burmese interpretations of the jataka, emphasis appears to be placed on mothers. Forbes provides a particularly detailed account of the Tawadeintha Feast which concludes on Thadingyut, relating it to two legends in the life of Gotama Buddha. In one legend, a woman prepared a rich offering of milk infused with celestial honey which she gave to the Buddha. The second legend attributes the feast's name to the Tawadeintha heaven, one of the heavens of *nat* deities situated above Mt. Meru. In this heaven, the Buddha preached to his mother and the *nat* deities about the gratitude due to mothers, saying,

> So great is the love and gratitude due to the mother, who nourished you at her breast, that I, the Lord the Buddha, though I can, by expounding the Law to her, lead my mother into the path of deliverance and salvation, even I, all-powerful as I am, can only satisfy the gratitude due to one of her breasts.[28]

The Buddha then descended back to earth by a triple ladder of gold, silver, and precious stones.

Forbes provides a wonderfully rich description of the festival in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Preparations for the various processions began weeks before. In addition to 'fantastic spires' (*pyathats*) and wishing trees hung with offerings for the monks (*padaytha-bins*), the procession included a 'richly-dressed damsel' who represented the woman who made the offering of milk to Gautama (Gotama), and who, according to the legend, had been his daughter in a former existence. The parade also included a papier mâché cow and an immense pot covered with gold leaf, in which the sacred milk was then boiled. In the evening a hundred-foot-long naga-dragon was paraded through the town. During the night the carriage bearing the image of Gautama descended from Mt. Meru. In the morning, some two hundred monks assembled. The milk offering, which no monk or layperson could presume to drink, was poured on the platform before the Buddha. The monks then walked between bamboo fences in a procession through the town to receive alms from the populace.[29]

Further highlighting the role of mothers is the ensuing event which follows on the night of the full moon in Tazaungmon (Burmese eighth month, circa November), namely the weaving of monastic robes within a 24-hour period.[30] This ceremony, called *matho yetchin* or *matho thingan*, commemorates another widely

26 Nash, *The golden road*, p. 104.
27 My thanks to Tharaphi Than, email, 31 Jan. 2014.
28 Forbes, *British Burma*, p. 180; see also Scott, *The Burman*, p. 330.
29 Forbes, *British Burma*, pp. 179–94; for further details see Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, pp. 184–5; Scott, *The Burman*, pp. 328–33.
30 Nash, *The golden road*, p. 106; Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, pp. 185–6.

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known story of the Buddha's life. The Buddha's mother, Maya, died shortly after Gautama's birth and was reborn in the Tavatimsa (Tusita) heaven. Seeing that her son would soon be leaving the palace and discarding his royal robes, she spent the entire night weaving him monastic robes and sent a celestial messenger to present her offering to Gautama. Her sister Gotami (the Buddha's aunt) continued this tradition and offered new robes annually.[31] In commemoration of this event, weaving competitions of yellow robes are held all over the country. Manning Nash provides a description of this ceremony in a village in the 1960s. During the afternoon a ritual was performed reconstructing the process of growing cotton, from harrowing to planting, plucking and ginning cotton. In the evening the cotton was brought to a single location where some thirty girls worked on spinning wheels and a large loom through the night.[32] Robe-weaving competitions are today occurring throughout the country, most notably at Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda. During these competitions, contestants work non-stop from night until dawn to weave these garments.[33]

The importance of mothers in the Burmese context is further reinforced in the novice ordination ceremonies (*shinbyu*). A novice's debt to his mother remains so great 'that the shinbyu can repay her for the milk he drank from only one of her breasts'.[34] As part of the ceremony, after the son has been ordained, 'the feast at the parents' house begins immediately, and of course ends in a *pwe*, which lasts till dawn'.[35] This practice continues into the present day. As Tharaphi Than comments, 'I have seen the jataka performed at initiation ceremonies — one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ceremonies for most Burmese families for which parents and grandparents spend all their savings for their sons and grandsons.'[36]

This emphasis on mothers appears to have been long-standing. Lillian Handlin notes the Bagan plaques include a birth episode where 'Wessantar's folded hands express gratitude to his mother', adding this element is 'absent from the Pali version'.[37] The most direct link to the *Vessantara Jataka* appears to be the moment when the children are reunited with their mother, Maddi:

> She [Maddi] trembled, and with a loud cry fell senseless, and lay stretched on the ground. The children rushed up to her, and they too fell senseless on top of their mother. At that moment two streams of milk flowed from her breasts into their mouths.[38]

31 Ibid. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tazaungdaing_festival (last accessed 14 Dec. 2016).

32 Nash, *The golden road*, pp. 106–7.

33 Htin Aung, *Folk elements in Burmese Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press. 1962), pp. 80–81. For a recent description, see John Clifford Holt, *Theravada traditions: Buddhist ritual cultures in contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), pp. 189–238. Northern Thai villagers also told me of this custom.

34 Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties that bind: Maternal imagery and discourse in Indian Buddhism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 171.

35 Scott, *The Burman*, p. 25.

36 Tharaphi Than, email, 31 Jan. 2014; for more on *shinbyu*, see Scott, *The Burman*, pp. 21–9; Nash, *The golden road*, pp. 124–31; Spiro, *Buddhism and society*, pp. 234–48.

37 Lilian Handlin, 'A man for all seasons: Three Vessantaras in premodern Myanmar', in Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, p. 159.

38 Cone and Gombrich, *The perfect generosity*, p. 90.

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I did not encounter this emphasis on the role of mothers in my conversations with monks and laity in Thailand about the meaning of the *Vessantara Jataka*. Instead emphasis was placed on Maddi as wife and Amitada as daughter. The idea that a novice's ordination brings merit to his mother is also widespread in Thailand, but not with an explicit linkage to the *Vessantara Jataka*. Handlin suggests that the Burmese interpreted Maddi as forceful and assertive, one who 'was also said to be perfecting her own accomplishments on the road to a rebirth as Prince Siddhartha's wife'.[39] By contrast, many modern feminists have deplored the jataka as portraying women as 'passive victims of patriarchal power'.[40]

Mazes

Although mazes typify northern Thai recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka*, they are not found in Thailand's central or northeastern regions.[41] However, mazes do appear to have been widespread across Burma. In their description of Thadingyut, the Ferrars describe 'labyrinths of bamboo' which are erected around the *zedis* (chedis), explaining, 'These labyrinths are called Wingaba, after the mountain maze, to which Prince Wethandaya was banished by his father.'[42] Enriquez, who visited Kengtung in the eastern Shan State of Burma during the Thadingyut festivities, provides an elaborate description of the celebration which was attended by the ruler (Sawbwa) and his family. Since his account is rare, I include it here in some detail:

> The Wingaba now set up is a maze of hurdles, with a shrine in the middle. People who reach the shrine make an offering there. But many little women wander about in the maze lost, calling for help, until they are quite tired and tearful. For three nights, [the] festival is held round the Wingaba. The Sawbwa and his family sit in a pavilion. The slopes round about the maze are banked with faces and silk turbans. Villagers come in from all the country round. This dense crowd of twenty thousand people collects at no other time in Keng Tung. 'See how good they are,' says the Sawbwa proudly. And indeed it is true. In all that crowd there are no police at all, and there is no need for them!! Each village, and each quarter of Keng Tung, sends an image, such as a dragon, *Nat*, tiger, bear, peacock, boat or *Key-na-yar* (human-bird). All these images move in procession round and round the Wingaba. As they pass the Sawbwa's pavilion, the strange animals bow and *shiko*. The ship rocks, the buffaloes fight, and the human-birds dance, swaying their glittering wings.[43]

39 Handlin, 'A man for all seasons', pp. 174–5.

40 Kornvipa Boonsue, *Buddhism and gender bias: An analysis of a Jataka tale* (Toronto: York University Thai Studies Working Paper no. 3, 1989), pp. 36–8; for more on gender see Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*; Louis Gabaude, 'Readers in the maze: Modern debates about the Vessantara story in Thailand', in Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, pp. 36–52; Khin Thitsa, *Providence and prostitution: Image and reality for women in Buddhist Thailand* (London: Change International, 1980), p. 20; Suwanna Satha-anand, 'Madsi: The female Bodhisattva denied?', in *Women, gender relations and development in Thai society*, ed. Virada Somswasdi and Sally Theobald (Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, Chiang Mai University, 1997), pp. 243–56.

41 See Bowie, 'Jujaka as trickster'; Bowie; *Of beggars and Buddhas*.

42 Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, p. 184.

43 Enriquez, *A Burmese loneliness*, pp. 20–21.

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As darkness falls, torches are lit and Enriquez notes that the Sawbwa's wife, sister, mother, and children also make their way through the maze: 'It is really charming to watch this procession of dainty little ladies, with lamps and great umbrellas, winding in and out through the maze towards the little gold Buddha in the centre.'[44]

Enriquez explicitly describes the maze as representing Vessantara's journey through Wingaba Hill. Handlin provides a similar analysis of an image of a maze in an eighteenth-century Burmese temple painting, explaining it as 'a metaphor for the human condition, and Wethandaya's path's intricacies'.[45] By contrast, the northern Thai maze (*wongkot*) is typically explained as representing not Vessantara's but the beggar Jujaka's adventure-laden journey to find Vessantara.[46] Thus even behind apparent commonalities lie differences.

Impact of British colonialism in Burma

Although Burmese monks may never have been involved in formal recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka*, their apparent lack of involvement today may have been the result of changes in state support, monastic reforms, British colonialism or pro-independence movements. In central Thailand the Ayutthayan and Bangkok courts supported and shaped state recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka*.[47] Members of the royal family, including King Rama IV (King Mongkut) himself, wrote many of the chapters being performed by monks in central Thailand today. However, historically, popular performances involved bawdy humour. King Rama IV is known to have denounced 'buffoonish recitations' of the *Vessantara Jataka*, suggesting 'the money collected for such a purpose could be better employed in buying fuel to burn dead dogs carcasses'.[48] In Burma, Enriquez describes royal participation in the Thadingyut festivities in Kengtung.[49] Ann Judson provides an account in Lower Burma of what is likely the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival in 1823, noting that '[m]ost of the older people spend the night at the pagoda, and listen to the instructions of the priests', adding that the 'viceroy' went out 'in all the pomp and splendour possible'.[50]

44 Ibid., p. 22; see also pp. 18–24.

45 Handlin, 'A man for all seasons', pp. 173, 175; Allan L. Goss, *The story of We-than-da-ya: A Buddhist legend, sketched from the Burmese version of the Pali text* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1886), p. 32; Gabaude, 'Readers in the maze'.

46 Bowie, 'Jujaka as trickster'; Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*.

47 Detailed most clearly in Gerini, *A retrospective view*; see also Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*; Jory, 'A history of the *Thet Maha Chat*'; Patrick Jory, 'The Vessantara Jataka, barami and the Bodhisatva-kings', *Crossroads* 16, 2 (2002): 36–78; Patrick Jory, 'Thai and Western Buddhist scholarship in the age of colonialism: King Chulalongkorn redefines the Jatakas', *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, 3 (2002): 891–918; Forrest McGill, 'Jatakas, universal monarchs, and the year 2000', *Artibus Asiae* 53 (1993): 412–48; Nidhi, *Pen and sail*; Sombat Chantornvong, 'Religious literature in Thai political perspective', in *Essays on literature and society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), pp. 187–205.

48 Gerini, *A retrospective view*, p. 57; see also Anne Hansen, *How to behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2007), p. 90.

49 Enriquez, *A Burmese loneliness*, p. 20.

50 Ann H. Judson, *A particular relation of the American Baptist Mission to the Burma Empire, in a series of letters addressed to Joseph Butterworth, Esq.* (Washington City: John S. Meehan, 1823), p. 103.

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The British conquest of Lower Burma in 1852 clearly intensified pressures on the court of King Mindon. Seeking to strengthen his control through monastic reforms, King Mindon sought to curb the use of luxury articles by monks, even prohibiting monks from using umbrellas and footwear except in case of sickness.[51] The Ngettwin Sayadaw, the queen's tutor, emphasised the virtue of meditation, suggesting that charity without the right mental attitude and awareness was not enough; he criticised the traditional merit-making, suggesting 'that the faded flowers and burnt-out candles dirtied a place meant for worship and meditation, and the food constituted an encouragement for rats to come near and dig holes in the foundations of the sacred edifice'.[52] Thus royal support for lavish state recitations may have declined in this period.

The reform orders were highly critical of monks attending entertainments, causing a division that lasted even after the British overthrew the Burmese monarchy in 1885. Like the Ngettwin Sayadaw, the Okpo Sayadaw also believed that 'monks should refuse to attend any religious function if there was dancing or music'.[53] This division in the sangha crystallised into a split between the Mahagandi and the Sulagandi. As Scott explains,

> The austere party is strongest in Maulmein, Henzada, and Pegu, and faction feeling runs so high that street fights between the scholars of the two sects are very common, and often so embittered that the English authorities have to interfere to restore peace in the town, for the laity take sides with equally bitter animosity.[54]

In addition to criticising the Mahagandi for wearing silk robes, eating off plates, wearing sandals, using umbrellas, and touching money, the Sulagandi monks and their lay supporters objected to festivals. As Scott writes:

> Pwes on feast days, or even in the neigborhood of the pagodas, are denounced by the reforming party; so are balloons with fireworks in them; the habit many monks have fallen into of going to visit Englishmen, with no other object than curiosity; and above all the noisy saturnalia in the monasteries at the end of Lent which have become so common in Rangoon.[55]

51 Htin Aung, *Burmese monk's tales*, p. 18.
52 Ibid., p. 21.
53 Htin Aung, p. 22.
54 Scott, *The Burman*, p. 149.
55 Ibid., p. 150. Scott, describing the offerings made at the Tawadeintha festival, remarks that the 'ascetic Sulagandi monks would altogether refuse to accept such a temptation to break their vows as a silver rupee tree' (ibid., p. 332). By comparison, Enriquez describes the Ari sect in Ava and Sagaing as having 'boxed, drank, womanised, bred and sold horses, and dabbled in alchemy and amulets. In the eighteenth century a thousand militant monks set out from Ava to fight the Talaings [Mons]'. He also comments that Shan monks in Keng Tung 'openly keep women' (*A Burmese wonderland: A tale of travel in Lower and Upper Burma* [Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1922], p. 102). Elsewhere Enriquez writes that in addition to gambling, monks 'indulge in every luxury. They eat after mid-day, drink wine, take opium, and smoke cheroots. They are not strictly celibate. They handle money, and even ask for it (*A Burmese loneliness*, p. 86). For more on controversies within the Burmese sangha, see E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and state in Burma: A study of monastic sectarianism and leadership*, ed. John P. Ferguson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) and Patrick Pranke, 'The "Treatise on the lineage of elders" (Vamsadipani): Monastic reform and the writing of Buddhist history in eighteenth-century Burma' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2004).

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Furthermore, the British had a major direct impact on the Burmese monastic order. The conquest of Lower Burma led to mass migrations of monks to Upper Burma. So devastating was the British impact that 'Many towns and villages in Lower Burma came to be without any resident monk and monasteries fell to neglect.'[56] As a result, Htin Aung suggests, in the towns of Lower Burma, 'by about the year 1870, a new generation of young men had grown up without having studied in a monastery'.[57] Drawing upon those monks who remained, the British set up new monastic schools to teach elementary mathematics and surveying.[58] Colonel H.S. Olcott, summarising his tour of Burma in 1891, apparently lamented that monks 'have as a body discarded their role of teachers of religion and morality to the people, and have become mere civil servants in the pay of the British government'.[59] Allan Goss suggests that by the late nineteenth century, palm-leaf manuscripts were comparatively scarce, so the jataka was 'better known in its dramatised form'.[60] Furthermore, Htin Aung writes that monks

> considered it improper to take such liberties with the text of the stories as given in the scriptures, and therefore they were at a disadvantage especially during King Mindon's time, when there was an influx of European fairy tales, short stories, and novels. In Lower Burma, Burmese drama even abandoned its old tradition of using the Jatakas as the source of its plays.[61]

It is unclear if the court or the colonial government had political objections to performances of the jatakas, either by monks or laity. Numerous sources suggest the comedy in dramatic performances, like popular performances historically in Thailand, was bawdy. Thus Gwendolen Gascoigne comments that in Burma the jokes are 'anything but refined, and are, to judge from some of the gestures, often extremely broad'.[62] The Ferrars describe the plays as invariably set in the palace, adding 'the countryman figures as jester or clown'. Noting the role of double entendres, they write, 'The topical allusions are of a pungent description; the spice of coarseness is on a level with the taste of our Elizabethan public.'[63] Enriquez writes, 'A stream of puns and jokes kept the audience in roars.'[64] That the comedy had political overtones is also suggested by the surviving collection of 'monks' tales'.[65] Enriquez comments that monks have 'thrust themselves into politics with unseemly passion' adding

56 Htin Aung, *Burmese monk's tales*, p.15.
57 Ibid., p. 28.
58 Ibid., p. 27. See also Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural narratives, colonial legacies and civil society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).
59 Htin Aung, *Burmese monk's tales*, p. 144.
60 Goss, *The story of We-than-da-ya*, p. ii.
61 Htin Aung, *Burmese monk's tales*, p. 33.
62 Gwendolen Trench Gascoigne, *Among pagodas and fair ladies: An account of a tour through Burma* (London: A.D. Innes & Co., 1896), p. 115.
63 Ferrars and Ferrars, *Burma*, pp. 173–4.
64 Enriquez, *A Burmese enchantment*, p. 110; see also p. 214.
65 Htin Aung, *Burmese monk's tales*. Unlike northern Thailand and to some extent northeastern Thailand where Jujaka was a beloved trickster, in Burma it seems Jujaka was 'comparable to the Jew of Elizabethan times. He was an Indian, a foreigner, tolerated and feared for his knowledge of astrology'. Htin Aung, *Burmese drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937) p. 97.

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that it is 'easy to quote, or misquote, a Jataka for political ends'.[66] The possibility that jataka performances provided a medium for critique of royal or colonial power is suggested by Htin Aung's analysis of a play based on the *Vessantara Jataka* written by the famous Burmese dramatist and courtier U Pon Nya (1807–66). Written at the behest of court ladies, Htin Aung notes that most of his plays 'had some hidden meaning that concerned the court'.[67] U Pon Nya begins his play at the point where Vessantara is already in exile with his family. The opening is a comic scene between two hermits in the forest, a scene which is not in the Pali version. As Htin Aung explains, U Pon Nya wanted 'to show that all human beings, whether rich or poor, high or low, religious or otherwise, suffer the same through the loss of loved ones'.[68] Under British rule, Forbes notes that 'For police reasons the sanction of the highest authority is always required for these gatherings.'[69] The government's concern may have been with the political content of these jataka performances, or simply with large potentially unruly gatherings.

The apparent lack of involvement of Burmese monks in recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka* may have also been the result of the growing influence of anti-colonial resistance movements, such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association founded in 1906. Over the course of the twentieth century, Burma developed a strong mass lay Buddhist meditation movement.[70] These educated monks and laity appear to have emphasised the historical life of the Buddha, rather than the jatakas. Enriquez suggests that such groups found bawdy humour 'to be very shocking', adding 'The Buddhist Association frowns whenever it thinks about them.'[71]

Although Burma's military juntas viewed mass gatherings as inherently dangerous, the Burmese government today has been relaxing its tight control and increasingly opening the country to foreign tourists. Officials refused to allow the Thadingyut festival in Yangon for over a decade because of security concerns, but it has now been resumed. Similarly the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival, banned for over twenty years following Aung San Suu Kyi's famous 1988 speech at the site before half-a-million people, is once again being permitted.[72] The tradition of boat races during Thawthalin had declined, but is now growing as a tourist attraction at Inle Lake.[73] Similarly, Thadingyut and other festivals are increasingly being advertised as tourist events.[74]

66 Enriquez, *A Burmese wonderland*, pp. 103, 196.
67 Htin Aung, *Burmese drama*, p. 77.
68 Ibid., p. 98; for fuller discussion, see pp. 76–108.
69 Forbes, *British Burma*, p. 144.
70 See esp. Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's mass lay meditation movement: Buddhism and the cultural construction of power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); and Schober, *Modern Buddhist conjunctures*.
71 Enriquez, *A Burmese enchantment*, pp. 110, 214.
72 Associated Press, 'Festival banned 20 years ago returns to Myanmar pagoda', 22 Feb. 2012, http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/festival-banned-20-years-returns-myanmar-pagoda (last accessed 28 Dec. 2016).
73 http://www.infosights.com/okumura/trips/inlelake/index.html (last accessed 26 Sept. 2017).
74 MRTV Web Portal, Thadingyut Lighting Festival, uploaded 6 Oct. 2013; http://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=d7c-VHeUdYY. Traditional *thadingyut* lanterns are increasingly being replaced by lanterns imported from China. See MRTV Web Portal, uploaded 6 Oct. 2013, http://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=dVQuij214iE. (both last accessed 28 Dec. 2016).

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The extent to which the jatakas were or will again become a part of living Burmese culture remains to be determined. Aung San Suu Kyi's interpretation of the *Vessantara Jataka* suggests that its modern interpretation will be pro-democratic. Suggesting that Vessantara was exiled for giving away the white elephant without the consent of the people, she argues, 'the legitimacy of government is founded on the consent of the people, who may withdraw their mandate at any time if they lose confidence in the ability of the ruler to serve their best interests'.[75]

Regardless of their future role, what little is known of performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* in Burma reveals significant differences with performances in neighbouring Thailand. Celebrations of the jataka during Buddhist Lent and novice ordinations suggest commonalities with central Thai practices, but not with other regions of Thailand. The use of mazes suggest commonalities with northern Thailand, but their meanings diverge; in northern Thailand the mazes represent Jujaka's adventures, whereas in Burma they appear to represent Vessantara's journey. The Burmese emphasis on the role of the Buddha's mother, symbolised in offerings of milk, appears to be widespread in Burma, but not in Thailand. Another important difference is the apparent lack of involvement of the Burmese sangha in formalised, chanted religious performances of the jataka. Handlin's research on the jataka over the course of several centuries and V. Fausboll's observations that a Burmese jataka manuscript differs so much from the Pali version that he would 'advise some scholar to give a separate edition' provide further evidence regarding the importance of exploring changes in the jataka's performances over time and across regions within Burma.[76]

Cambodia: Celebrating children and ancestral spirits

The *Vessantara Jataka* has a lengthy history in Cambodia. Twelfth-century carved reliefs of the jataka appear at Angkor Wat.[77] An inscription at Angkor Wat dated 1747 records that monks recited the *Vessantara Jataka* on the occasion of the ordination of several high-ranking women as nuns; offerings included an eight-year-old boy.[78] The French scholar Adhèmard Leclére, writing of the jataka's popularity in Cambodia in the nineteenth century, describes it as 'the most important' and the 'most beautiful' text, one that was known by everyone, recited at temples, painted on temple walls, and performed in theatrical productions.[79] The individual characters from the story were so universally recognised that they were used to teach children and as shorthand descriptors: 'a mention of Jujak-brahmin could

75 Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from fear and other writings* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 173.

76 As quoted in M. Winternitz, 'Jataka gathas and Jataka commentary', *Indian Historical Quarterly* (Calcutta) 4, 1 (1928): 12.

77 Vittorio Roveda and Sothon Yem, *Preah Bot: Buddhist painted scrolls in Cambodia* (Bangkok: River Books, 2010), pp. 103, 118.

78 David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past: Selected essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1996), p. 24.

79 Adhèmard Leclére, *The Buddhism of Cambodia*, trans. Renata von Scheliha (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899), pp. 119–20; see also Leclére, *Le livre de Vesandar, le roi charitable* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1902); Joseph Guesdon, 'La litterature khmere et le Buddhisme', *Anthropos* 1 (1906): 91–109, 278–95; Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 70.

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silence unruly children; a devoted mother was a "Maddi"; a generous person a "Vessantar"; an old man married to a young woman was a "Jujak"'.[80]

Despite its importance, little information survives about how the jataka was performed. Leclére provides a translation of a Khmer rendition of the jataka and wonderful details about a host of other rituals, but little about the *Vessantara Jataka* performances themselves.[81] Nonetheless, two remarks can be made. The first is Cambodian performances seemed to share more in common with performances in Thailand — particularly the central Thai region — than those in Burma in regard to the role of monks, performance location, and timing. Nonetheless, one major difference emerges, namely the emphasis on Vessantara's children. In this section I will consider evidence of commonalities with Thailand, the major difference, and the vicissitudes of Cambodian history that have impacted jataka performances.

Commonalities with central Thailand

Given that there was considerable Siamese (i.e. central Thai) influence on Khmer Buddhism in the nineteenth century, one would expect commonalities in the performances and interpretations of the jataka. The future king of Cambodia, Ang Duong (1796–1860), was himself the son of a Thai mother and lived in Bangkok for 27 years. The future head of the Khmer sangha, Thiang (1823–1913), was captured as a prisoner of war by the Siamese army as a young boy and sent as a slave to Bangkok. He ordained and established links with Ang Duong. During the early nineteenth century, Siam and Vietnam competed for control over Cambodia. After Siam lost the wars of 1831–34, Cambodia was ruled by a queen with Vietnamese backing. However, following revolts in 1841, Thailand's King Rama III installed Ang Duong as king. In 1849–50 King Rama III ordered a number of texts to be sent to Cambodia, including the *Vessantara Jataka*.[82] Thiang also returned to Cambodia, becoming *sangharaja* (supreme patriarch) in 1857 and implementing a series of reforms. In 1854, a Thammayut sect modelled on King Mongkut's movement in Thailand was established by a Khmer monk named Pan (1824–94). Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. Nonetheless, monks in the 1870s continued to travel to Siam, returning with Siamese versions of the *Vessantara Jataka* and other texts.[83]

Although we have little information about Cambodian performances, evidence indicates that monks chanted the text at temples. Scattered remarks regarding its timing suggest stronger links with central Thailand than with neighbouring Laos. Leclére suggests that believers asked monks to perform jataka readings on the occasion of almost any festivity.[84] According to Ketya Sou et al., there was a tradition at Stung Treng in northeast Cambodia of reciting certain episodes during ordination ceremonies, focusing on Vessantara's life as an ascetic.[85] Anne Hansen states that the

80 Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 29.

81 Leclere, *Le livre de Vesandar*. May Ebihara ('Svay, A Khmer village in Cambodia', PhD diss., Columbia University, 1968) provides one of the only anthropological accounts of village life, but she does not specifically mention any performance of the *Vessantara Jataka*.

82 Jory, 'A history of the *Thet Maha Chat*', pp. 100–101.

83 Hansen, *How to behave*, pp. 80, 86–7.

84 Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, p. 119.

85 Ketya Sou, Hean Sokhom and Hun Thirit, *The ordination ceremony of Buddhist monks in Cambodia:*

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Vessantara Jataka was widely recited at funerals and other occasions of merit-making.[86] Research by John Holt suggests that the jataka used to be chanted on Pchum Ben, a celebration in honour of the dead.[87] Often called Ancestors' Day, this ceremony is a fifteen-day festival, culminating on the fifteenth day of the tenth month in the Khmer calendar, just before the end of the Buddhist Lent. Believed to be the day when the gates of hell are opened, Cambodians make food offerings to ghosts and ancestors, paralleling Wan Sarda in central Thailand.[88]

Differing emphasis: The children

However, despite apparent commonalities with central Thai patterns, one major difference stands out, namely, the importance placed on the children. Leclére concludes from his comparison with Sri Lankan and Siamese versions, that the expansion of the scene in the Kumarn chapter in which Vessantara gives away his two children represents a distinctive Khmer addition.[89] Elsewhere I have argued that the central Thai renditions also place more emphasis on this scene than other regions of Thailand, portraying the children as metaphysical boats across the sea of suffering.[90] However, as Hansen analyses the Khmer interpretation, both Vessantara's grief at his children's suffering and the children's feeling of aloneness emphasise that 'each individual is unprotected'.[91] She intriguingly interprets Leclére's account, recorded at the turn of the twentieth century, as possibly reflecting 'the ethos of the times, a period of unrest and uncertainty in which few people could effectively control their own moral destinies'.[92] She notes the parallel between Vessantara's pouring water on the ground to signify the merit he had earned by giving away his children with the sprinkling of water in rituals intended to transfer merit to 'help deceased loved ones who are alone and unprotected in the fruition of their karma'.[93] One can easily imagine how this scene might resonate at funerals and Pchum Ben rituals.

A more dramatic emphasis on the role of Vessantara's children is the Khmer addition of a fourteenth chapter which expands on the lives of Vessantara's son Jali and daughter, Kanhaa.[94] Leclére found a text, the *Satra of King Chea-Ly* (Jali), in which

Past and present (Phnom Penh: Center of Advanced Study, 2005), p. 63; see also Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, p. 119.

86 Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 27.

87 John Clifford Holt, 'Caring for the dead ritually in Cambodia', *Southeast Asian Studies* 1, 1 (2012): 70. This date is reinforced by suggestions that recitations occurred near or at the end of Buddhist Lent — see for example, Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 100 (Satoru Kobayashi, email, 2 Feb. 2014). See also Ebihara, 'Svay, a Khmer village', pp. 402–3; Satoru Kobayashi, 'An ethnographic study on the reconstruction of Buddhist practice in two Cambodian temples: With special reference to Buddhist Samay and Boran', *Kyoto Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 4 (2005): 489–518.

88 Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*, pp. 42, 62, 282n36.

89 Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 30.

90 Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*, pp. 34, 52–7.

91 Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 31.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 The jataka typically is divided into 13 chapters. A temple scroll dated 1877 has yet another fourteenth chapter, namely a scene of a monk worshipping a glass reliquary containing a tooth. Pattatorn Chirapravati notes that in northeastern Thailand the jataka terminates with Vessantara paying respect to the Culamani Stupa (Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, p. 116). In Thailand an 88-year-old villager told

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the royal brother and sister marry, becoming king and queen. After the queen gives birth, the king becomes infatuated with a servant girl. When the queen learns of this relationship, she begs the king to love her at least as his sister, 'but he is driven by his passions and, rejecting his sister and queen, the two live apart'. This version goes on to describe Vessantara's rebirth in heaven for 500 million years until he was born as Siddhartha (Gautama).[95] In another version, after Vessantara dies, Jali and Kanhaa 'are chosen by their people and by the kings of nearby kingdoms to become the rulers of all; they are married and anointed king and queen of the world. A son named Sihanuk-kumara is born to them, who becomes king on the death of his father'.[96] The son's name clearly resonates with that of Cambodia's long-standing twentieth-century ruler, King Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012). In a rendition of the Buddha's biography Hansen studied, Gautama Buddha's life begins with the founding kings of Kapilavatthu, is then traced to Vessantara and through Vessantara's children, 'through their offspring and 82,000 successive generations to the great-grandparents of King Sudhodan and Maya, the parents of Gotama Buddha, both of whom are understood to be the direct descendants of Jali and Kanhajina'.[97]

Changing historical context

Khmer debates over the *Vessantara Jataka* appear to have closely paralleled those in Siam between the Mahanikai and Thammayut monastic orders. The Khmer Thammayut movement also viewed that 'merit could not accrue from such "farcical" renderings of the Maha Jataka, and that its embellishment for heightened entertainment value was a travesty of the "true words" of the Buddha'.[98] A Khmer biography of King Mongkut written in the early twentieth century hints at the controversies in Cambodia:

> Some monks preached the Maha-jatak as verse-*lakhon* with musical accompaniment. Other monks rented themselves out to chant the Malai [sutta]. Still others came dancing in and shrieking out theatrical performance (*yiker*) lyrics. Some of them worked as goldsmiths, artists, or cement layers, accepting payment. Others were imposters who 'ordained' every morning and 'disrobed' every evening [in order to] go out for women; they ate food after noon and handled money, buying expensive goods in the market from the merchants, consuming food or medicines that had not been offered to them as alms, working as physicians.[99]

me that in the past his village would parade representatives of Jali and Kanhaa to the village temple, complete with the ceremonial *khan maak* (betel nut offering tray), and stage the wedding at the temple (Interview with Lung Waaj Ryangdej, Baan Den Samrong, T. Haat Song Khwae, A. Tron, Uttaradit, 24 Aug. 2015).

95 See Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, pp. 116–17; and 'Le satra du Roi Chealy', in Adhèmard Leclére, *Cambodge, contes et legendes* (Paris: Librairie Emile Bouillon, 1895). The prolonged heavenly stay raises a challenge to the prevailing understanding of the *Vessantara Jataka* as the 'penultimate' birth. Also intriguing are stories of the Gotama Buddha's earlier birth as the younger sister of the bodhisatta Dipankara (Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 35).

96 Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, p. 108.

97 Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 34.

98 Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 103.

99 Translated by Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 90.

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A French surveillance report from 1916 noted that Thammayut monks were distinguished by their 'stricter observance of religious regulations', but that Khmer monks in general, although 'peaceable' and 'hospitable', possessed a 'vagabond humor'.[100]

Although Penny Edwards writes that reformist 'ideas had little impact outside elite enclaves' and the Thammayut sect 'remained the preserve of the royalty', conflict between the two orders intensified in Cambodia.[101] In 1918 'modernist' monks were summoned to a meeting with King Sisowath himself to address petitions that had been sent in from provincial monastic officials alleging that the modernists were preaching that the *Vessantara Jataka* was false. The modernist monk Chuon Nath's response provides a rare insight into upcountry performances:

> The monks are not preaching that the entire [text] is false. When they preach about 'falsity,' they are referring to segments of the text that were added later, such as the part describing how Ta Jujak [Jujaka] resorted to eating an entire pot of rice and curry leading his stomach to burst open with such a deafening noise that it caused all the elephants in the pavilion to stampede. The monks are not saying that these words are false, but rather that they were added in later for the amusement of listeners. They are not really the holy words of the Lord Buddha.[102]

If performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* remained popular in the early twentieth century despite Thammayut reform efforts and French colonial rule, the Second Indochina War and subsequent victory of the Khmer Rouge had a devastating impact on the Khmer sangha and religious practice. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in writings from the 1960s, promoted a view of Buddhism as 'fighting underdevelopment, eliminating social injustice, raising living standards, and promoting fraternity and concord' and suggested that Vessantara was 'a sort of Buddhist Karl Marx'.[103] Vittorio Roveda and Sothon Yem suggest that to the extent that Vessantara 'exemplifies the renunciation of feelings, detachment from material goods and emotional family ties', this deeply rooted ideology 'easily merged with the collective principles of the Khmer Rouge'.[104] However, performances of the jataka likely came to an end in 1976, when the Khmer Rouge forced monks to disrobe. Temples no longer considered sacred, they banned religious worship and burned religious texts. More than nine thousand monks are believed to have met violent deaths between 1970 and 1979.[105]

With the ouster of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, monastic ordination resumed, but for the next decade only men over the age of 50 were allowed to ordain.[106] Khmer

100 Ibid., p. 97.
101 Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 103; see also Hansen, *How to behave*.
102 Translated by Hansen, *How to behave*, p. 105.
103 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, pp. 147–8.
104 Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, p. 121; see also Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, and Ian Harris, *Buddhism in a dark age*: *Cambodian monks under Pol Pot* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).
105 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*; Harris, *Buddhism in a dark age*, p. 137; Kobayashi, 'An ethnographic study', p. 491.
106 Kobayashi, 'An ethnographic study', p. 491.

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Buddhism began to revive more fully in the 1990s. Murals of the *Vessantara* and other jatakas began being painted again in temples throughout Cambodia.[107] Nonetheless, as Satoru Kobayashi notes, an entire generation born at the end of the 1960s grew up 'without the experience of participating in traditional popular Buddhist rituals'.[108] Consequently, as a monk commented to Holt, monks no longer recite the *Vessantara Jataka* 'because they do not have the knowledge of the text'.[109]

Just how the jataka will transform with modern Khmer audiences is unclear. Despite its near extinction, *Vessantara Jataka* recitations appear to be reviving. Indeed one can find recitations of the jataka by Khmer monks online. Heroic figures such as 'the supremely virtuous' King Vessantara are entering the bodies of spirit mediums.[110] As Angkor Wat grows as a tourist destination, the association of the jataka with Visvakarman, the divine architect sent by Indra to construct Vessantara's forest hermitage and linked with the construction of Angkor Wat, may be foregrounded, both being portrayed as 'a perfect pleasure ground in which all uncivilized or rustic values are banished'.[111] The Pchum Ben also appears to be increasing in importance.[112] Even in the early days of the Khmer Rouge, besides the Cambodian New Year, the only other public rite deemed acceptable was 'the merit making for dead ancestors (pchum ben) in September'.[113] Following the ouster of the Khmer Rouge, there were numerous ceremonies for all those who died during the Khmer Rouge period. If Hoenik Kwan's discussion of the continuing presence of ghosts in Vietnam is any indication, one might expect the jataka to become increasingly important as part of the Pchum Ben ceremonies.[114] Countermanding the possibility that the *Vessantara Jataka* will again become important in Cambodia is the role of the Thammayut order in re-establishing the ordination lineages; with one exception, Thammayut temples in Thailand do not recite the jataka.[115]

Laos: Celebrating community

Given that modern-day Laos was historically comprised of three kingdoms, performances likely varied internally. Nonetheless, early-twentieth-century French

107 Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot*, pp. 100–123.
108 Kobayashi, 'An ethnographic study', p. 508.
109 Holt, 'Caring for the dead', p. 70.
110 Didier Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice and its relationship with Cambodian Buddhism: The *Gru Parami*', in *History, Buddhism and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 166, 153.
111 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 248.
112 Holt, 'Caring for the dead'; see also Erik Davis, 'Treasures of the Buddha: Imagining death and life in contemporary Cambodia' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009).
113 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 173.
114 Hoenik Kwon, *Ghosts of war in Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
115 Ang Duong's sons, the future King Norodom (1834–1904) and Sisowath (1840–1927), were both ordained at Wat Boworniwet in Bangkok (see Santi Pakdeekham, 'Court Buddhism in Thai–Khmer relations', in *Buddhist dynamics in premodern and early modern Southeast Asia*, ed. D. Christian Lammerts [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015], p. 419). The resurgence of the Thammayut order came about with the return of Sihanouk to Cambodia in 1991 (Kobayashi, 'An ethnographic study', p. 491). The one Thammayut temple in Thailand that performs the jataka is Wat Raatbamrung in Nong Khaem, Bangkok; others do not.

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scholars attest to the long-standing importance of the festival celebrating the *Vessantara Jataka*, Boun Phavet (Bun Phawet/Phra Wet) festival throughout Laos. As John Holt summarises, the *Vessantara Jataka* is 'easily the most popular jataka of all among the Lao'.[116] Several sources suggest that this is a favoured time for Lao males to be ordained into the monkhood, or new Buddha images or temple buildings to be consecrated.[117] Various eyewitness accounts of recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka* in Laos reveal that they share much in common with those in northeastern Thailand, not surprising given their historical bonds. Northeastern Thailand is largely comprised of descendants of war captives from Laos. However, there appear to be four possible minor differences between Laos and northeastern Thai performances, regarding the relative attention paid to paddy rice and salt, sheds built for guests, cloth scroll processions, and special invitations to Vessantara. Drawing on comparisons with performances in northeastern Thailand, in this section, I will summarise the commonalities, highlight apparent differences, and describe the impact of the rise of the Thammayut and Pathet Lao on jataka recitations.[118]

Commonalities

In Laos and northeastern Thailand, Boun Phavet historically has occurred in their fourth lunar month, circa March.[119] In both regions, the recitation includes the *Phra Malai Sutra*, drawing on the villagers' belief in Maitreya, the future Buddha, described by Marie-Daniel Faure as having 'a golden fishnet through which those who have not at least once attended a boun pha vet will fall'.[120] As in northeastern Thailand, dozens of monks and novices are invited, the offerings are not ostentatious, and the preparations involve considerable participation. As in the northeast, the Lao accounts also mention a procession of the thousand balls of rice

116 John Holt, *Spirits of the place: Buddhism and Lao religious culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 40; see also Karpelès, 'Voyage'; Georges Condominas, 'Notes sur le Bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural Lao', *Archives de sociologie des religions* 25 (1968): 93; Patrice Ladwig, 'Emotions and narrative: Excessive giving and ethical ambivalence in the Lao Vessantara Jataka', in Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, p. 53; Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and decline* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), p. 174.

117 Marcello Zago, *Rites et ceremonies en milieu Bouddhiste Lao* (Rome: Universita Gregoriana, 1972), p. 295; Holt, *Spirits of the place*, p. 216.

118 For more on northeastern Thai performances, see especially Lefferts and Cate, *Buddhist storytelling*; Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas*.

119 Although Boun Phavet is also often called 'boun dyan sii' or 'the fourth month merit-making', there is considerable variation in when it is held. As Lefferts and Cate explain, the festival is usually held 'during the fourth lunar month (March and early April), but we have recorded instances of its occurrence from early January through late May and into June' ('Narration in the Vessantara Painted Scrolls', in Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*, p. 124). A website for Luang Prabang suggests the recitation there occurs in December and January; see https://www.tripadvisor.com/Travel-g295415-s408/Luang-Prabang:Laos:Events.And.Festivals.html. (last accessed 26 Sept. 2017); Holt observed a recitation there in early February (*Spirits of the place*, p. 211). Marcello Zago mentions that the *Vessantara Jataka* can also be recited for royal funerals (*Rites et ceremonies*, p. 297).

120 Marie-Daniel Faure, 'The "Boun" Pha-Vet (4th month festival)', in *Kingdom of Laos: The land of the million elephants and of the white parasol*, ed. Rene de Berval (Limoges: A. Bontemps, 1959), p. 297; see also the original article in French, Marie-Daniel Faure, 'Trois fetes laotiennes', *Bulletin des 'Amis du Laos'* 1 (1937): 21–43; Ladwig, 'Emotions and narrative', p. 56; Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, pp. 292–3.

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and the *kan lon* offering.[121] In both, the invitation of Upakut is a key element at the beginning of the recitation.[122]

Marcello Zago provides an account of Boun Phavet in the late 1960s, likely from Sayaboury, but which resonates closely with accounts from northeastern Thailand. Noting that dozens of monks and novices were invited from neighbouring villages, the formal ceremony began in the mid-afternoon when a procession formed to invite Phra Upakut 'to guard the village during the festival'.[123] After inviting Upakut, the procession circumambulated the recitation hall three times and entered the hall. The monks were invited to chant, beginning with the *Phra Malai Sutra*. As night fell, the number of attractions increased, with dances, games, theatre and other forms of entertainment. Before dawn the following morning, the drums sounded, arousing everyone from their sleep to reassemble for the procession of the thousand balls of rice. The procession was led by the clergy and grew slowly as it proceeded. Each lay person carried a plate with balls of rice, puffed rice, flowers and a lit candle. The procession circumambulated the recitation *sala* (hall) three times, villagers placing offerings of sticky rice as they passed the altars to the Four Directions. Arriving at the pulpit chair, the procession again circumambulated three times, placing their offerings of rice, flowers and candles in the baskets suspended by the pulpit. The laity *waied* the monks and requested the precepts. The monks recited the *Sakarat Luang* which tells of the past and future of Buddhism. The laity then requested the recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka*. The recitation lasted about seventeen hours without interruption. At either interesting passages or if impressed with the skill of the reciter, listeners threw handfuls of puffed rice in the air towards the pulpit. According to Zago, some listened to understand history, some for entertainment, some for merit, some in the hopes of well-being in the next life, and some to know what the year has in store.[124] Each monk received an offering after the completion of their portion outside of the hall. At the conclusion, the abbot blessed the sacred water in the jars, which the faithful then carried home for protection and purification. The sacred cord was similarly divided into pieces and distributed among the listeners.[125]

121 In Faure's description, the *kan lon* arrived as 'a faked horse or elephant made out of white cloth hand mounted on a bamboo framework, at the neck of which hangs a rich collar made up of silver coins'. Some donors may even offer live horses 'mounted by their own son, who will then become the "servant-novice" of the religious to whom the gift is offered' (Faure, 'The "Boun" Pha-Vet', p. 297). Zago describes a *kan lon* shaped like a *prasat*, 'a construction of a miniature temple mounted on bamboo poles decorated with bank notes, some of which have been folded into flower designs' (Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 295).

122 Upakut is a water deity, often understood to have been a novice or monk, who is associated with protecting villagers from harm and ensuring rains (e.g. Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in north-east Thailand* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 161–78]). Karpelès notes a larger altar for 'l'esprit du Buddha'; these offerings include a mat, a miniature mattress, pillow, incense, candles, balls of rice, flowers, a teapot and an almsbowl; these offerings — especially the teapot and almsbowl — suggest that the altar is for Upakut (Suzanne Karpelès, 'Voyage au Laos', *Bulletin de l'École française d'éxtreme orient* 31 [1931]. Ladwig highlights the importance of Upakut, noting that in areas without rivers, Upakut can be invited through normal water pipes (Ladwig, 'Emotions and narrative', p. 56). For more, see also John Strong, *The legend and cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

123 Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 292.

124 Ibid., p. 295.

125 Ibid.

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Differences

However, there appear to be four possible minor differences between performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* in Laos and northeastern Thailand. Add for parallel grammar.. Accounts of performances in Lao villages by Karpelès, Faure and Zago include two elements which are not mentioned in existing northeastern descriptions, namely 1) special attention to paddy rice and salt and 2) a farewell ceremony to the sheds that were built for guests (*lang pham*). Additionally, although mention is made of cloth scrolls, their accounts do not describe any processions of the long cloth scrolls typical of northeast Thailand.[126] Most significantly, they do not describe any special invitation of Vessantara.

The four minor differences between the Lao and northeastern performances seem to heighten the Lao emphasis on celebrating communities, itself already an important element in northeast as well. Suzanne Karpelès provides one of the earliest descriptions of the *Vessantara Jataka* in Vientiane, held in February 1931, noting that every temple organises this grand event, with dozens of monks who come from far and near. Her description resonates with northeastern Thai performances. Outside are four small altars for the cardinal directions at which are made offerings of rice.[127] She describes a pulpit, a chair covered with banana tree trunks that have been decoratively sculpted to hide the chanting monk from view of the public, as well as jars of perfumed water and a cloth painting of the jataka. However, unlike northeasterners I interviewed who did not mention paddy rice and salt as important elements, she notes that in the centre of the sala is a sack of paddy rice and a basket of salt. Zago also describes the temple as decorated with altars to the 'Patrons' of the four cardinal directions, the scroll, a sala for the guests, and sacks of rice seed for sowing and a basket of salt.[128]

Both Lao and northeastern jataka performances traditionally involved large numbers of monks and villagers coming and staying overnight. Marie-Daniel Faure provides an account of a village performance before 1937.[129] Her description accords closely with accounts from northeastern Thailand, but with an intriguing mention of a final ceremony for the sheds. She mentions that the 'the total number of presents usually reached sixty or eighty', suggesting that the same number of monks from various villages in the area were involved in the recitation.[130] Villagers held a lottery to determine who would host various passages which Faure describes as 'a peculiar divining practice,' explaining, 'from the various adventures related in these passages everyone tries to guess their fortunes for the coming year'.[131] Given the large numbers of invited villagers and monks, considerable preparation was involved. Women husked large amounts of paddy, both for sweets and for 'the distillation of numerous jugs of alcohol'.[132] Men built sheds to house the guests staying overnight during the festival; on the eve of the festival 'the

126 Ladwig mentions scroll processions 'can take place', implying they are not considered a key element as in northeast Thailand ('Emotions and narrative', p. 56).
127 Karpelès, 'Voyage au Laos': 332.
128 Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*.
129 Faure, 'Trois fetes laotiennes'.
130 Faure, 'The "Boun" Pha-Vet', p. 295.
131 Ibid.
132 She adds, the pulpit is 'decorated with flowers and green and of which each panel is naively painted with scenes from the Life of the Buddha' (ibid.).

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teeming and vivid crowd of guests is invading the sheds' and the young girls 'are hastily freshening up in the smoky and crackling light of the torches'.[133]

In Faure's account the ceremony began at dawn with the *Khao Phan Kon* or 'Thousand Riceballs' procession.[134] The recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka* began after the morning meal. Unlike central Thailand where the first readings were by the local abbot, in Faure's account 'Care is taken, however, to assign the first passages to the monks living in the farthest away Wats who will have to leave before the end of the feast.'[135] The audience is described as listening 'with attention and great devotion', and throwing handfuls of puffed rice 'which rain down like the flower petals the angels showered on the Pha Vet [Vessantara] in order to glorify him after each of his alms'.[136] Not mentioned in accounts I read of Thailand, Faure's account notes an additional concluding rite, in which the most senior monk then read the *Lang Pham* or 'the washing of the sheds', which Faure describes as 'moving farewell to the sheds which have sheltered so many believers who came from all the neighboring villages'.[137]

Unlike northeastern Thailand which today typically includes separate invitations to Upakut and Vessantara to attend the jataka recitation, the Lao celebration appears to focus on Upakut. The early twentieth century French accounts make no mention of inviting Vessantara. Although a possible artefact of the sources, these accounts predate the rise of the Pathet Lao and raise a question about respective attitudes towards monarchy. Intriguingly, both in Laos and northeastern Thailand, the interpretations of Vessantara's generosity are ambiguous. In explaining the procession, northeasterners emphasise the role of the citizens in extending the invitation to Phra Wet to return to govern his kingdom. Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate suggest that 'in the performance of Bun Phra Wet, monks and laity alike have interpreted to us the relationship between the citizens and their king — the act of sending him into exile and then requesting his return — as the workings of *prachathipathai* (democracy)'.[138] Similarly a former longtime Lao monk, discussing the episode when Vessantara gives away the magic white elephant, explained to Patrice Ladwig:

> As a king, Vessantara has responsibility for the kingdom and all the people living in it. They pay taxes, are his subjects and the kingdom flourishes until he gives away the magic white elephant … The elephant is the property of the people. Vessantara knows that, but still gives it away without any conditions when the Brahmins from the other kingdom beg for it. The people are right to demand his dethronement, because he has acted in a highly irresponsible manner. A king cannot simply do what he wants to do, he has to care for the people and listen to them. That is sometimes the problem with kingship.[139]

133 Ibid., pp. 295–6.
134 Ibid., p. 296.
135 Ibid., p. 295. On central Thailand, see Phya Anuman Rajadhon, 'Thet Maha Chat', in *Essays on Thai folklore* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1988), p. 198.
136 Faure, 'The "Boun" Pha-Vet', p. 296.
137 Ibid., p. 297. The ceremony concluded with villagers who 'recall to Nang Tholani [earth goddess] their pious deeds of the day'.
138 Lefferts and Cate, *Buddhist storytelling*, pp. 55–6; see also pp. 4, 91.
139 Patrice Ladwig, 'Narrative ethics: The excess of giving and moral ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka', in *The anthropology of moralities*, ed. Monica Heintz (New York: Berghahn, 2009), p. 151.

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Impact of Pathet Lao

In 1975, with the victory of the Pathet Lao, the American-backed Royal Lao Government collapsed and the monarchy was abolished. In April 1976 the Pathet Lao government issued detailed regulations on Buddhist festivals. As Grant Evans explains:

> Given that the Buddhist sangha in Laos was one of the main vertical organizations to reach down into the villages, it was inevitable that the communist government after 1975 would wish to gain control over it. Thus it reorganized the sangha into the United Buddhist Association, which in turn was subordinate to the Communist Party's national front organization … Buddhism lost its status as a state religion and the government announced that 'every Lao citizen is allowed to practice any religion he wishes. He also has the right not to practice any religion'.[140]

Pathet Lao policies would have been likely to tamp down any extravagance associated with the Boun Phavet and other Buddhist ceremonies. A central feature of the state's political rhetoric at the time related to the importance of thrift for economic development. As Evans explains, 'Thrift applied to both time and money, and extravagant festivals were seen to be wasteful of both by drawing resources away from development.'[141] Thus the new government prohibited gambling at festivals, discouraged the use of spirit mediums, and urged that 'liquor distillation must be strictly minimized, and we must avoid unnecessary parties or religious rice donations', these latter restrictions in part due to rice shortages.[142] The government sought to emphasise the importance of 'everyone devoting their time to production and development' and therefore monks were also encouraged 'to establish gardens and work for their food'.[143] Rather than superfluous gifts and prizes, gifts to winners of boat race and other competitions 'should be in the form of production tools so that they will be utilized in work'.[144] In addition, regulations were issued that a festival 'must be restricted to each locality. The people in a province must not congregate in the provincial capital'.[145]

However, the Pathet Lao government did not ban religious festivals outright. Albeit with restrictions on gambling, the That Luang Festival continued as usual because it provided 'a place for our people and friendly countries to display their economic, cultural and arts achievements'.[146] Similarly, the Boat Race Festival continued, albeit with production tools as prizes for the winners and 'without the unpleasant forms as in the old regime — a reference to the elimination of its often bawdy phallic aspects'.[147] While Evans notes that these policies 'led to discontinuation of some temple festivals or their extreme attenuation', he nonetheless suggests 'In general,

140 Grant Evans, *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), p. 57.
141 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, p. 58.
142 Ibid., pp. 44, 58–9.
143 Ibid., p. 59.
144 Ibid., p. 58.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.; Martin Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom, Marxist state: The making of modern Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), p. 101.
147 Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom*, p. 101; Evans, *The politics of ritual*, p. 58.

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however, in the rural areas the traditional calendar, centered as it was on the *vats* [wats] and associated with the agricultural cycle, remained in operation beyond the reach of the state.'[148] This portrayal of Pathet Lao policies would suggest that recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka* would have continued with little interference, with the exception of a reduction in alcohol consumption, gambling, and evening entertainment.

However, even if the formal policy was apparently permissive, the underlying ideology was at best ambiguous towards the legitimacy of a form of Buddhism based on the Jataka tales. At the time of the Pathet Lao rise to power, there were both Mahanikai and Thammayut sects of Buddhism in Laos. As Holt explains, although the influence of the Thammayut in nineteenth-century Laos was minimal, 'in the twentieth century it had an important impact upon segments of the Lao sangha'.[149] The Thammayut temples were more likely urban, more likely associated with the Royal Lao Government, and well represented in southern Laos.[150] In order to bring monks under closer government control, under the Pathet Lao both sects were united in the United Buddhist Association, 'with office-holders appointed only with Party approval'.[151]

Initially the Pathet Lao 'drew upon the goodwill many monks had towards the revolutionaries as upholders of traditional Lao cultural values against the materialism and corruption of the West'.[152] The sangha 'was a major vehicle for popularizing socialist ideas'.[153] Noting that both Buddhism and socialism 'taught equality, promoted communal values, and sought to end human suffering', these monks portrayed the Buddha as 'a man with a social conscience'.[154] As Martin Stuart-Fox details the changes:

> Monks were urged to purge their scriptures of 'backward' content, propagate socialist morality, teach the illiterate to read and write, and provide traditional herbal remedies for the sick. Monasteries functioned as cooperatives. Monks received a rice ration for their teaching and health work. But they were expected to grow vegetables and be otherwise self-sufficient, so as not to have to depend on gifts from the faithful.[155]

Monks increasingly 'were also urged to purge Buddhism of such superstitions as belief in the existence of demons, or of life after death in one of the Buddhist heavens or hells. The accumulation of religious merit was downplayed; and *karma* was denounced as leading to fatalism and pacificism'.[156] This shift in emphasis may have led to a decline in support for recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka*.

148 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, pp. 57–8.
149 Holt, *Spirits of the place*, p. 77.
150 Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom*, pp. 89–92; Evans, *The politics of ritual*, pp. 54–5.
151 Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom*, p. 80.
152 Ibid., p. 78; see also Holt, *Spirits of the place*, pp. 116–28. For discussion of Lao Buddhism in the 1960s–1970s, also see Joel Halperin, 'The role of religion in government and politics in Laos', in *Southeast Asia: The politics of national integration*, ed. John T. McAlister (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 202–14.
153 Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom*, p. 79.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., p. 81.
156 Ibid., pp. 78–9.

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Further contributing to a possible decline in the frequency of *Vessantara Jataka* recitations was a decrease in the overall number of monks in Laos. The secretary of the *sangharaja* who fled Laos in 1979 said that youths were being discouraged from joining the sangha and that, in early 1979, there were only 1,700 monks in the country compared to 20,000 when the Pathet Lao took over.[157] Almsgiving also likely declined due to rice shortages in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War.[158] As Evans summarises the late 1970s: 'During these austere years people were reluctant to display their wealth by giving to the temples, obstacles were placed in the way of men entering the monkhood, and many people were wary of showing too much religious fervor', adding that '[t]ypically these measures were most effective in the main towns.'[159]

However, with the economic liberalisation of the 1980s, religious practice rebounded. As Evans explains:

> In the early 1980s, however, close government control of Buddhism began to relax, and even party members could enter the monkhood for a short time to earn merit for parents who were sick or who had died. By the mid-1980s an efflorescence of Lao Buddhism had begun. Growing prosperity in the towns as a result of economic reforms begun in 1979 and accelerated after 1986, saw money flow towards the *vats* for their repair and for the building of Buddhist monuments, all highly visible forms of merit-making.[160]

By the early 1990s, Stuart-Fox writes that 'lines of monks could be seen each morning accepting the offerings of the faithful. Attendance at Buddhist ceremonies had greatly increased'.[161] As of 2005, there were about 22,000 Buddhist monks at 4,937 Buddhist temples in Laos.[162] Although earlier school curricula excluded religious instruction, school textbooks published in the 1990s included the story of Boun Phavet.[163]

Assessing the future of Boun Phavet in Laos is difficult. Already in Laos by the 1970s, it had become 'imperceptible in urban areas'.[164] Since 1990 Lao monks have been allowed to study in Thailand and 'arrangements for Thai aid with Buddhist texts for teaching are made on a temple-to-temple basis'.[165] In 1990 the Thai Crown Princess began regular visits to Laos, giving large donations to temples in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and elsewhere.[166] Similarly the Thai king began making regular donations in support of the Lao sangha.[167] In addition, as Justin McDaniel notes, 'There is a long tradition of Lao monks studying in Thailand and vice

157 Ibid., p. 105.
158 Ibid.
159 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, p. 63; see also discussion in Holt, *Spirits of the place*, pp. 138–54.
160 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, p. 63.
161 Stuart-Fox, *Buddhist kingdom*, p. 107.
162 Holt, *Spirits of the place*, p. 9.
163 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, pp. 69, 164.
164 Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 290.
165 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, p. 65. The Thammayut likely shared the French view that the *Vessantara Jataka* was puerile (Holt, *Spirits of the place*, p. 97).
166 Evans, *The politics of ritual*, pp. 108–10.
167 Ibid., pp. 111–13.

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versa.'[168] With Boun Phavet declining in northeastern cities as well, it will depend where in Thailand these monks study.

At present recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka* are being maintained and possibly being expanded. Holt provides us with a detailed description of a Boun Phavet celebration which took place in Luang Prabang in February 2007.[169] The performance that John Holt observed appears to represent a combination of traditional practices with Pathet Lao, urban, Thammayut and even global diasporic influences. The ceremony lasted four days and included the invitation to Upakut, ordinations of novices and nuns (*mae khao*), and a candlelight procession of the Thousand Riceballs. Noting that most of the audience were very elderly women, Holt wondered whether this was because the elderly have more time or because 'their generation predates the establishment of the Lao PDR, after which participation in merit-making rites was initially discouraged and then looked upon largely with indifference by the government authorities'.[170] Unlike other Lao village performances, the *Phra Malai Sutra* was not recited.[171] The audience listened 'patiently and intently, with their hands folded together in pious attention',[172] but with no indication of laughter, tears, gongs sounding or puffed rice being thrown, giving the impression of a formal reading. Indeed the chief monk later told Holt that one of his own personal concerns had to do with 'keeping the Buddhasasana separate from cultural traditions'.[173] The funds were being used to build a new *sala* which was intended not for monks, but for 'laity taking precepts in the future whenever Vat Xieng Thong hosts multiple-day festivals'.[174] The primary sponsors for the gifts were international. Overseas Lao living in North America and Australia, as well as laity from Vientiane and Bangkok, contributed donations in absentia.[175]

As tourism grows in Laos, one might expect more elaborate processions. However, in addition to the processions for Upakut and the Thousand Riceballs, whether they develop to include the scroll and royal procession typical of northeastern Thailand today is unclear. Lao performances even before the Pathet Lao took power did not appear to include them and one can imagine that a royal procession might seem anachronistic today given the abolition of the monarchy.[176]

168 Justin McDaniel, 'Questioning orientalist power: Buddhist monastic education in colonial Laos', in *Contemporary Lao Studies*, ed. Carol J. Compton, John F. Hartmann and Vinya Sysamouth (DeKalb: Center for Lao Studies and Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2009), p. 217.
169 Holt, *Spirits of the place*.
170 Ibid., pp. 219–21.
171 John Holt, email, 24 Feb. 2014.
172 Holt, *Spirits of the place*, p. 219.
173 Ibid., p. 220.
174 Ibid., p. 216.
175 Ibid., p. 211.
176 A monk from Boulikhamsay told me that in his area 13 villages would cooperate, each sponsoring a different chapter. A novice is designated as Upakut and carried back from the water to the temple. A novice is chosen because full-fledged monks have to observe 227 precepts; as a *thewadaa* [deity] Upakut only observes 8 precepts. Their procession also includes a monk who represents Vessantara and rides a real elephant; Maddi and the others walk alongside.

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Conclusion

Noted anthropologist Kirin Narayan observes, 'Folklore, in its very nature, displays multiple existence and variation.'[177] This essay suggests that, contrary to the prevailing paradigm of its uniformity, the *Vessantara Jataka* has undergone significant variations in its interpretations and performances across mainland Southeast Asia. My research in Thailand revealed significant differences across the northern, northeastern and central regions of the country with regard to frequency, calendrical timing, duration, number of monks, selection of lay sponsors, types of processions, key symbols, and key chapters, as well as differences in the interpretations of the actions of the major characters. In the north, emphasis was placed on the anti-royalist trickster figure of the beggar, Jujaka; in the northeast, emphasis was placed on the reunification of the royal family; and in the central region, emphasis was placed on the children as boats across the sea of suffering.[178] The scanty secondary sources that have provided the foundation of this essay on interpretations and performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* in Thailand's neighbouring countries allow only crude amalgams of national differences; nonetheless they allow suggestions that jataka performances in Burma celebrated mothers; in Cambodia they emphasised children and ancestral spirits; and in Laos they celebrated the coming together of local communities. Although the jataka has long been viewed by scholars as a pro-royalist text celebrating Vessantara as both a king and future Buddha, this comparative review shows that the jataka has also been interpreted in ways critical of monarchy and supportive of democracy and socialism.

That the jataka has virtually disappeared from its birthplace in India gives the quest to understand the story's ever-changing meanings across time and space a particular poignancy. If the jataka was once very popular across the Theravada Buddhist world of mainland Southeast Asia, the twentieth century has posed major challenges, shaping its performances and even threatening its extinction. Each country saw the rise of reform movements which objected to its mythical character, its bacchanalian elements, or its political implications. In each country, the future of the jataka remains uncertain. Overseas support from the Southeast Asian diaspora, desires to preserve cultural heritage, and tourism are likely to play important roles in shaping jataka performances in new directions.

This essay is intended to serve as an encouragement to more vigorous historical and anthropological scholarship on the *Vessantara Jataka* and other classics of Buddhist popular culture. Wendy Doniger has suggested,

> When myths tell us what happened, they do not always tell us why the people in the story did what they did or how they feel about what happened to them. To this extent, they remain open and transparent and can be retold, within one culture or in several cultures, with several very different meanings.[179]

177 Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, saints, and scoundrels: Folk narrative in Hindu religious teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 26.

178 Bowie, 'Jujaka as trickster'; Bowie; *Of beggars and Buddhas*.

179 Wendy Doniger, *The bedtrick: Tales of sex and masquerade* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. xviii.

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As my work on its historical variations within Thailand suggests, more careful historical and anthropological research is likely to reveal further differences in the interpretations and performances of the *Vessantara Jataka* in each of the countries in the Theravada Buddhist world. Far from invariable, a better understanding of the historical and geographical vicissitudes of the *Vessantara Jataka* promises deeper insight into the political flows of ideas within each of these countries and across their shifting borders. Long simplified as a story about charitable giving, understanding the dynamism of the *Vessantara Jataka* promises a rich trove of gifts for scholarship long into the future.

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