



Raw cotton and other items that will be part of the offering of robes, or thaut kathin, are arranged for formal presentation to the temple's abbot. Once he officially accepts and blesses the items, they are returned to the laypeople so that production may begin.

The Chula Kathin Festival

Text and Photographs by Dr. Linda S. McIntosh

Chula kathin, a Buddhist festival also known as *kathin laen*, celebrates the end of Buddhist Lent and allows participants to earn merit through the offering of material for monks' robes to the temple. Celebrated in villages throughout Thailand and neighboring countries in the past, this merit-making tradition used to be held annually,

but over the years only a few communities continued to carry out this religious ceremony. In the last few decades, this rite has been revived in some areas. In northern Thailand, Mae Chaem District of Chiang Mai Province was one of the first areas to reintroduce this tradition, and the festival has been held in Chiang Rai on several occasions. In Northeast

Thailand, members of the Phuthai ethnic group living in different villages of Mukdahan Province have been the primary organizers of this local religious festival, and it also has been held in Sakon Nakhon Province.

I had the privilege of participating in a chula kathin festival in the Phuthai village of Ban Phu, Nong

Sung District, Mukdahan Province. The details of this ceremony may differ according to the locale and group of hosts, but the main procedures are similar. This special event differs from other occasions when laypeople provide robes to the Sangha (community of Buddhist monks) in that the material has to be produced within a 24-hour period. The steps of production that must be performed in this time frame include collecting the raw cotton, dyeing the woven fabric and weaving one set of robes.



In front of the specially planted cotton patch, offerings are presented to begin the ceremony.

Legends state that the ritual originated during the life of Buddha. While visiting temples, Buddha would sometimes notice that a monk did not have a good robe. He would enlist members of the community to help him produce fabric to provide the monk with a robe. The work had to be completed quickly, thus requiring a group effort. The merit-making ceremony of chula kathin was born from these impromptu events.

When hosting this festival, a primary set of rules is followed. For example, the ritual must take place between the first waning day of the 11th lunar month and the 15th waxing day of the 12th lunar month, or right after the end of Buddhist Lent, Auk Phansaa. To receive the offering, a temple must have a minimum of five monks in residence. Several months in advance, the potential host (or hosts) informs the abbot of the selected temple of the intention to hold a chula kathin. The abbot decides whether to give permission to carry out the ceremony. The monk who will receive the offering of robes is chosen by the abbot or

another member of the Sangha. A temple may receive robes from a chula kathin in consecutive years but may not host more than one per year. To avoid favoritism, the same monk cannot be a recipient of offerings in consecutive years.

The host is often a person of high standing, either by wealth or position of power, who has the ability to mobilize a large group of volunteers to carry out the various steps of production. The host provides food and refreshments for the participants while they carry out their tasks. Entertainment is also provided to make the event a joyous one.

Communities are allowed flexibility in holding the rite to fit their circumstances. Some ceremonies begin at dusk, while others start at dawn or even midday. If a community does not have an adequate number of people to accomplish the ritual, others may be brought from elsewhere. All participants may earn merit by partaking in the ceremony; the host is not the sole merit-maker. Some may contribute by providing food and drinks



Map by Joette Berkompas/Sawaddi

Members of the community and surrounding areas begin the procession, some carrying tools used in the different steps of production.





Every weaver has her own set of equipment, including a spinning wheel, for the various stages of textile production.



Weavers work quickly to reach their goal: producing enough cloth for one set of robes, a minimum of seven meters. The fabric may come from different looms as the official form of a robe resembles the patchwork design of a rice field.

The naturally dyed, hand-spun and hand-woven fabrics are displayed with other items that will be given to the monks of the temple in the formal ceremony.



are new forms of entertainment. Schoolchildren and other groups may perform for the participants. During some festivals, monks may lead the participants in meditation and prayers, allowing for pious moments among the festive activities.

Total cloth production may exceed the amount required to make one set of robes. Excess fabric may be given in offering to be used for another monk. Any excess raw materials are

usually reserved to make cloth for the temple at another time.

At the end of the 24-hour period, another procession is held to *thaut kathin* (offer the items) to the temple. After the morning food alms to the monks has taken place, participants, villagers and visitors gather together to parade through the village. Men and women dance to music and song. Confetti and coins wrapped in metal foil are thrown into the crowd.

The parade ends at the host temple, and the offerings are arranged for presentation to the resident monks. The host or his representative performs the formal rites to make the offerings, which the abbot accepts. The monks then lead the lay people in prayers.

Prior to the 2010 festival, no one from the village of Ban Phu remembered holding a chula kathin in their village. Some of the village organizers went to one held in another village in Mukdahan to observe how it was organized. Ban Phu village received government support to hold the festival. In the past the host might have been the ruler of the area, or *chao muang*. In the ceremony at Ban Phu, the head of the village was the representative at the start of the festival, making the symbolic request to hold the chula kathin at the temple. Then the provincial governor was the representative to offer the items



Besides weaving, villagers earn merit by participating in other ways, such as providing traditional entertainment during the ritual. Here, weavers take a break and join in the fun.

to the abbot. For members of this community, it was a great honor to have the head of the province come to their home to represent them.

The revival of this festival keeps alive a vibrant tradition dating back to the time of Buddha and one that exemplifies the deep connection between the laity and the monkhood in Thailand. ❖

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