

Memories of Religious Persecutions in 1940s Thailand: Martyrs and Pilgrimage among the Thai Catholics

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Abstract: This article aims to consider how the Thai Catholics and the Catholic Church of Thailand perceive and accommodate the religious persecutions the 1940s and reconstruct the memories of persecutions in the Buddhist country by focusing on the Catholic martyrdom and the pilgrimage in northeast Thailand as well as Catholic persecutions in other areas. Then, I would like to show that the Thai Catholics nowadays tend to understand the persecutions not as a distinct confrontation between Catholics and Buddhists, avoiding the friction with Buddhists in social situations of 'living in the same society (*yuu nai sangkhom*)' with the Buddhists. At the same time, the Catholic Church of Thailand converted the memories of persecution in the 1940s to the constructive action of worship and pilgrimage to the Blessed in order to strengthen its followers' religious faith, which contributes the Thai Catholics to have a pride in their religious identity and to hold their religious faith in the Buddhist country of Thailand.

Keywords: Thai Catholic, persecution, the Blessed, pilgrimage, society, memory.

Introduction

As for intercultural Education, Ebuchi define it as 'cultural process or activities related to a character formation which is developed under the opportunity of intercultural contact or exchange, or under the structural conditions of permanent existence of intercultural contact and interaction' (Ebuchi 1997a: 16, 1997b: 65). He then argues that the process develops as self adjusting process of the 'guest' to 'host' culture, and he regards the self adjusting process as 'intercultural adaptation' (Ebuchi 1997b: 65). In this regard, Catholic is a 'guest' to Buddhist in Thailand at present and most Catholics were 'guests' also because of their ethnic origin until 1940s. To examine their accommodation of the religious persecutions in the 1940s and their social situation in Thai society would be helpful to understand the character formation of 'Thai Catholic'.

Thailand is a Theravada Buddhist country. More than ninety percent of the population is Buddhist and the portion of Catholic is merely less than one percent. National identity is strongly tied with Buddhism: at the national level, the Constitution defines that the king of Thailand should be a Buddhist. Important days of Buddhism are designated as a public holidays, official ceremonies tend to include Buddhist rite, and Buddhism is taught in the public education. At the individual level, Thai Buddhists practice merit making by giving alms to monks in the morning, visiting temple or inviting monks to many individual or calendrical rites and festivals. Furthermore, becoming a monk during a Buddhist Lent season is regarded as a rite of passage for Thai male. Thus, Buddhism comes into people's everyday life in Thailand. Even in these social situations, Catholics keep their religious identity as well as keep good relationships with Buddhist neighbors as a same 'Thai'.

However, during the early 1940s, Thai Catholics suffered persecutions by Buddhist officials or neighbors. The border struggles between Thailand and French Indochina in 1940 triggered a religious persecution of Catholics in Thailand. Seven Catholics were martyred in Songkhon Village in the northeast Thailand and these

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martyrs were pronounced as the first Blessed in Thailand in 1989. Many Catholics, as well as some Buddhists, make a pilgrimage to this place.

In order to clarify what the situation of Catholics encountered during the religious persecutions and how the Catholics and the Catholic Church of Thailand perceive the persecutions and reconstructed the memories of persecutions in the recent years, firstly, it examines why and how the incident of martyrdom happened and how the Catholics practice the pilgrimage. Secondly, it investigates what happened in the other area during the religious persecutions in 1940s and thirdly, it scrutinizes how the Catholics perceive the persecutions and what affects their present perception and attitude.

Catholicism was regarded as a foreign religion or a French religion by Thai people before. This was due to their ethnic origin and the history of the missionary work. Most of Catholics' ancestors were of Portuguese, Chinese or Vietnamese origin coming to Thailand as hired soldiers, prisoners of war or traders etc. Catholic missionary work in Thailand was initially conducted by Portuguese missionaries and Catholics were mainly Portuguese at this time. Dominican missionary started missionary work in 1567, followed by Franciscan in 1584 and Jesuits in 1609 (Prawat 1996:1-2). There were about 2000 Catholics in 1622 in Thailand (Seri 1982:10-11) and they were mostly Portuguese who came from India or Malacca and lived in Ayutthaya as hired soldiers (Ishii 1984: 204). In the middle of the 17th century, the leading position of missionary was replaced by the French missionaries. Missions Etrangeres de Paris (MEP) started their missionary in 1662. The Pope later established Siam Vicariate Apostolic in 1673 and appointed Father Paru and Father Lambree of MEP as the Bishop. .

Since Ayutthaya period (-1767), missions had been limited to foreigners, mainly Vietnamese and Chinese, and missions to ethnic Thai citizens (Thai, Mon, Lao) had been prohibited (Seri 1966:49-53). Moreover, even in the early period of Chakri Dynasty (1782-), Catholics had lived within their community taken care of by Catholic priests apart from Buddhist communities (Seri 1982:65). Freedom of religion was approved and ethnic Thai could convert to Catholicism only after King Rama V's reign (1868-1910). Most of the Catholics nowadays, thus, are descendants of such people with foreign origins or spouses of those Catholics.

Background of the Persecution

There had been persecutions of Catholics since the Ayutthaya period. Persecutions until the end of the 19th century were mainly caused by the Catholic priests rejecting or misunderstanding Thai religion, traditional customs and culture. Two reasons can be summarized as follows: one is that a Catholic priest wrote a book against Buddhism²; the other is that priests refused Catholics' participation in the ceremonies with religious element held by the king³ (Seri 1982: 47-55, 72). While general believers suffered in some cases, persecutions came from the confrontation between leaders: Catholic priests and Thai political authority.

Persecutions in the 1940s which caused martyrdom at Songkhon, however, happened not because of the confrontation between leaders, but because of the hatred of Catholics by Thai people who hated France and regarded Catholicism as a French religion. The scheme of confrontation between leaders stated above had changed as

² Bishop Lanau came to Thailand in 1664 and wrote a book against Buddhism for missionary purpose in King Narai's era (1656-88). (Prawat1996:49-53, Seri 1982:42-46).

³ Those ceremonies included processions to Buddhist sacred places, important court rituals of Brahman origin, rituals of animal sacrifice for expulsion of infectious disease.

Western colonialism expanded in Indochina Peninsula. After the treaty with Siam in 1867, France had begun to seize Siamese territory. Many border territories were ceded to France with the treaty of 1888, 1893 and 1907⁴(Wyatt 1982:201-208). Then, anti-France and anti-Catholic feelings of Thai people flared up out of the border struggle between Thailand and French Indochina in November 1940.

Together with the hatred of France caused by this humiliating history with France, there was another reason that triggered the persecution of Catholics: nationalism policy by Phibun Regime (1938-44). By issuing *Rattaniyom*, a series of twelve Cultural Mandates from 1939 to 1942, Prime Minister Phibun tried to build a new Thai nation⁵ and integrate the country with ‘*Watthanatham*’, a culture characteristic to Thai nation. ‘*Watthanatham*’ that Phibun urged all people in Thailand to acquire the way of living and morality appropriate to civilized nation. He thought that a civilized country should be the one without regional differences and focused on central Thai people, the majority in the country, as a standard ‘Thai nation’ (Murashima 2002:202). Under such an integration policy, Phibun government forced non-ethnic Thai and non-Buddhists to abandon their ethnic language, custom and education to become ‘Thai nation’ who speaks Thai, to believe in Buddhism, and to have a loyalty to the nation by respecting the national flag, the nation and the king. In July and August 1940, national broadcast of Thailand criticized religions other than Buddhism saying that Buddhism was the religion of Thailand suitable to Thai characteristics and other religions came from other countries which would not suit Thai people (Bayee:2). Phibun promoted his ideology by plastering his slogans on newspapers and billboards and repeated over the radio (Wyatt 1982:255) in addition to the use of government officials mobilizing the people for a coming war. People in Thailand, so, were inevitably involved in the propaganda and began to see Catholicism unfavorable in Thai society.

To make matters worse, in the middle of this situation, the border struggle between Thailand and French Indochina broke out when Thai forces invaded both the disputed Lao territories and western Cambodia in November 1940 (Wyatt 1982:255-256).

Incident of Martyrdom at Songkhon

The incident of martyrdom happened in December 1940 at Songkhon Village which is located in Mukudahan Province in the northeast Thailand⁶. The land of Laos can be seen from the village across the Mekong River, the border between Thailand and Laos. There were about 500 or 600 villagers in 1940 and all were Catholics. The village⁷ had a church, priest’s residence, sister’s residence and a school attached to church. Father Paolo Figuee, a Frenchman, was a priest of the church and Philip Siphong, a head master, two sisters from a Lao convent and a man in the village taught in the school (Khanakamakan 1989:8-12).

⁴ Starting from the regularization of French protectorate over Cambodia by the treaty of 1867, France conquered the frontier between Vietnam and Siamese Laos in 1888, then, forced Siam to accept the cession of the entire Laos east of the Mekong by the treaty concluded after the Franco-Siamese Crisis in 1893. Furthermore, Siam had to conclude unequal treaties including extraterritoriality, and ceded to France the West bank territories of the Mekong in 1904 and some western Cambodian provinces in 1907 (Wyatt 1982:201-208)

⁵ Rattaniyom no.1 declared the change of the name, Siam to Thailand (Tamada 1996:138).

⁶ Songkhon is about 30 kilometers north of the center of Mukudahan.

⁷ Songkhon village was not the Catholic village at first, but all villagers converted to Catholics when a French priest saved this village in 1887 from the epidemic which struck the village soon after the pioneering.

When Thailand invaded the French Indochina in November 1940, police was deployed at the border area and 6 policemen were stationed at Songkhon village. The policemen ordered the villagers to abandon their faith, which led to the martyrdom of seven Catholics. I will summarize this incident citing from the booklets written and published by the Catholic authority who researched the incident in later years⁸.

Martyrdom of teacher Philip Siphong

Among the policemen stationed at Songkhon, Mr. Lue, the police officer in charge of Songkhon, especially hated Catholics. So he called the villagers in the meetings and ordered them for many times to abandon their faith in Christianity which was a religion of France and to convert to Buddhism which was the national religion of Thailand. Villagers did not care when the parish priest Figeo was still in the village. After the deportation of Father Figeo to Laos at the end of November 1940, Lue further tormented villagers with forced conversion. It was, however, in vain since Philip Siphong and two sisters took care of villagers even under the situation of no one to consult or no one to hold them a mass as the nearest Catholic village of Songkhon was 70 kilometers away. Lue, being angry with villagers not obeying him, decided to get rid of Philip Siphong first.

Philip Siphong wrote a letter to officials in Mukdahaan to report that policemen oppressed villagers and the chief officer Lue even forced a village woman to become his temporary wife. Unfortunately, this letter, however, reached to the hand of Lue, so that he decided to kill Philip Siphong as soon as possible. Lue and a policeman from Mukdahaan, with intention to kill him on the way, deceived Philip Siphong to go to see district head of Mukdahaan by showing a false letter on December 15th. In spite the fact that the villagers stopped him, Philip Siphong left the village and was shot by Lue in the forest on December 16th⁹.

Martyrdom of Six Catholics

Even after the Philip Siphong's death, many villagers held on to their faith under the care and leadership of two sisters, Sister Agnes and Sister Lucia. So, Lue oppressed sisters next. On December 22nd, Lue pressed the sisters to convert and when they denied, he deceived them into not wearing nun's habits. Later, Lue called all the villagers to assemble in front of the church and pronounced that everyone should convert to be Buddhists henceforth because he had received the order from the district to convert all the Christians to Buddhists. He threatened the villagers with a gun. At the night of December 24th, the sisters decided to die for their faith and wore nun's habits again. Sister Agnes, then, wrote a letter of decision of martyrdom on the 25th night, and a girl named Butsi delivered the letter to Lue on the next day, December 26th. On that very day the two sisters and another 4 Catholics were martyred at the cemetery being shot by Lue and other policemen.

The policemen kept on oppressing villagers of Songkhon after the martyrdom. They even compelled them to pull down the church. Lue and other policemen were transferred to another station in June 1941 and replaced by new policemen.

⁸ I cite from following two booklets: one is a booklet (Khanakamakan 1989) mainly based on the article written by Nawaekmaitrii Traiphop and edited by Prakhin Chumsaai na Ayuthayaa and Father Samraan Wongsagiam. It was written on the basis of records collected by Father Narin during his stay at Songkhon from 1981 to 1985 and Bishop Bayee and the statements of Father Suphon who stayed at Songkhon from 1985 to 1989. Another booklet (Bayee ---) is the report of Bishop Bayee who visited Songkhon and conducted a research for three weeks in 1950.

⁹ Philip Siphong's body was buried in the hole dug by villagers nearby and remained there until 1959 without moving to bury in Songkhon because Lue did not allow it and the villagers feared police.

Nevertheless, the persecution of Catholic still continued in Songkhon and in other areas in Thailand until the war time had passed.

Evidence and documents including the letter of Sister Agnes were sent to Rome to examine for beatification, and the seven martyrs¹⁰ of Songkhon were beatified in Rome by Pope John Paul II on October 22nd 1989.

Pilgrimage to Songkhon

The church of Martyrs in Songkhon attracts many people not only from neighboring areas but from other provinces. The feast day of the church is the immediate Saturday prior to December 16th. Apart from the day, the church has mass and procession of relics on October 22nd, which is the day of beatification, and the first Saturdays of every month. The church adjoins the Mekong River and has vast precincts¹¹, at which there are church building¹², the residence of priests, old sisters' hut, historical garden, old and new cemeteries, and seven buildings named after the seven martyrs. Those seven buildings are for seminar, study meeting, the residence of Catholic monks and nuns or accommodation for pilgrims. The church was built in modern style with chairs for 500 people¹³. Adjoining the side of the Mekong of the church, there is a place for the relics of seven martyrs and their wax figures.

Pilgrimage to the church of seven Blessed is planned in time for the mass on Saturday morning. When I joined the pilgrimage tour with some Catholics from Chanthaburi Province in the southeastern part of Thailand, located along Gulf of Siam, we departed at the night of Friday December 13th 1996¹⁴ and arrived at Songkhon on Saturday morning. We stayed there the whole day of Saturday and then came back to Chanthaburi on Sunday. We went to Songkhon by chartered van. Members of the pilgrimage tour were four women from Turian¹⁵ city, 10 kilometers northwest of the central Chanthaburi, and one woman from Chanthaburi City¹⁶.

Arriving at Songkhon in the early morning, we could get some sleep before the mass. There were a great number of pilgrims coming from various places. Some prayed in the cemetery before the mass. The mass started at 10 am conducted by three bishops with eleven other priests. During the mass, Bishop of Chanthaburi dioceses preached a sermon, in which he explained that Catholicism was mistaken as a French religion during the war of Indochina and at the beatification of seven martyrs, hundreds of Thai Catholics went to Rome to celebrate. Then, he preached that Catholics would not be reluctant to meet their death since the faster one die, the sooner one could go to heaven. He stressed the devotion of their lives to God and religion by nourishing their lives (*jaroen chiiwit*)¹⁷. After the mass, there was a procession of relics to the old cemetery where six were martyred. There preached a priest, and after

¹⁰ They are Philip Siphong (33 years old), Sister Agnes Phila (31 years old), Sister Lucia Khambang (23 years old), Agatha Phutta (59 years old), Cecillia Butsi (16 years old), Bibiana Khamphai (15 years old) and Maria Phorn (14 years old).

¹¹ with 64 rai. 1 rai is 1600 square meters.

¹² The present church was started to build in October 1992 and completed in June 1995.

¹³ Those who sit outside can also attend the mass as the church has glass covered walls.

¹⁴ I conducted my field research in Chanthaburi during September 1996 to September 1997. Since it was 20 years ago, there still lived those who experienced and remembered the days of persecution in 1940s.

¹⁵ The name is tentative. Turian City had about 10000 residents and about 400 were Catholics during that time.

¹⁶ Apart from these five people going to Songkhon, there were another five women who went to Sakon Nakhon Province to see *Moo Tham*¹⁶, a traditional healer, for curing their illness. There were only five from Turian city, but many members of Chanthaburi Church made a pilgrimage by coach at that time.

¹⁷ namely, attending a church on Sunday, praying, enduring hardship or reading bible

that, each adherent kissed the receptacles, then the ceremony was finished. Many of pilgrims remained at the cemetery and offered an earnest prayer.

In the daytime, there were study programs for children coming from nearby towns or from Bangkok. Some religion teachers also came from Bangkok. People spent their time reading books in the library, relaxing and looking around within the church precinct. At night, pilgrims started saying a prayer in the cemetery. After finishing a prayer in the cemetery, they would move to the church for a prayer, some prayed through the night¹⁸.

Next morning after a mass, while waiting for the van to pick us up for Chanthaburi, a fellow pilgrim who was a Catholic friend in her 20's from Turian city, talked to me about some miracles or mysterious occurrences that she heard happened just yesterday. One was that somebody sitting behind us saw seven martyrs walking nearby the sun at about 4 pm. And the other was that the water had been running out of the tree by the cemetery and smelled like Thai flavor although it was a western tree¹⁹. On the way home, we stopped at a riverside market in Mukdahan and enjoyed shopping. This pilgrimage was that of 1996 and even now in 2015 I heard that pilgrimage to Songkhon was still very popular and attracted Catholics in Turian City and some Buddhists who have heard about its efficaciousness.

The Meaning of the Pilgrimage to the Songkhon Church

What of Songkhon attracts so many people to this place? I would like to consider here what the pilgrimage to Songkhon means to the Catholic Church, Catholic followers and to Buddhist pilgrims.

As for the Catholic Church of Thailand, it is intended to become the center for the promotion of followers' faith and religious education and activities (Anusorn Moranasaki 1995: 51). It provides places for prayer and educational programs. The buildings have a library and lodging for Catholics monks and nuns. In the sermon of the mass, the bishop stressed the devotion to their faith by learning from the seven martyrs. Under this intension, the memories of the persecutions are replaced and converted to a story of ideal model as Catholics and no Buddhists, apart from policemen, enter the story of martyrdom²⁰. Pilgrimage also provides an opportunity of merit-making '*tham bun*²¹' and recreation. When Catholics go to the church feasts of other churches, they make a merit by offering for a church or priest. Although '*tham bun*' is not the central practice for Catholic, it is still one of the ways for nourishing their lives (*jaroen chiiwit*) in terms of helping a church.

In addition, the Catholic Church has presented miracle stories which strongly attract Catholic followers and even Buddhists as well. Miracles are thought to be the proof from God. Miracles in Songkhon include stories of recovering from incurable

¹⁸ The church gave us a free accommodation and dozens of people bunked down together in large rooms.

¹⁹ The more prayers uttered, the more water came down and the stronger the fragrance became. When she took the water in the hand, it disappeared even though it should usually remain.

²⁰ The booklets of Catholic authority which I used for the summary above mention other villages and relatives of villagers of Songkhon in the description of the Teacher Philip's way to Mukdahan, but we cannot know from them either the relationship of the villages or whether the relatives were Buddhists or Catholics; the story is purely for Catholic faith.

²¹ '*Tham bun*' is one of most significant terms to understand Thai Buddhists' religious activities. Among merit making practices, there are '*thood kathin*' and '*thood phaapaa*' in which villagers or colleagues chartered a car to go for a merit-making trip to temples in the other areas and offering to the temples and enjoying gathering with the people there. Catholic church feast and the pilgrimage have a similarity to those practices.

disease or mysterious occurrence happening within Songkhon church precinct²². As for healing, a Catholic nun collected following miracle stories²³: a man who encountered a traffic accident was saved his life by asking the seven Blessed on losing consciousness just after the accident; a woman who got burned when she was a child could avoid leg amputation after praying to seven martyrs in Songkhon etc²⁴. The miracle of curing illness could also be seen in the story of the well with sacred water of Songkhon church (Khanakamakan 1989: 59-62). These miracle stories are close to Catholic followers. When I was in Chanthaburi, a teacher told me that she prayed to the Blessed for her sick pupil and the child recovered within a couple of months after the prayer although a doctor had presumed the need of taking medicines for years.

In addition to those miracles of curing illness granted by Catholic Authority, pilgrims are also attracted to Songkhon by other sorts of divine favors such as business and money matters, winning a lottery, fortune telling etc. In Thailand, it is very common to 'bon' or to vow to the gods or powers. Buddhists go to vow at the shrine of local spirits, guardian spirits of the prefecture, of the country, or spirits of famous past kings. As for Catholics, they vow to God in Christianity. When adherents have some wishes, they can either pray or vow²⁵.

Buddhists also vow to the Blessed in Songkhon since the Blessed in Songkhon are famous for granting the wishes. In Chanthaburi, Buddhists hear about Songkhon from Catholic neighbors and go there to pray with Catholic neighbors. Talking about Songkhon with Catholics in Turian city, they tended to mention Buddhist participation in the pilgrimage out of their own accord. All of these Buddhist pilgrimages were that of those who had trouble with debt or money, such that a Buddhist with a debt vowed at Songkhon and won a lottery, so he chartered a car to Songkhon and offered a hundred floral garlands and offered rice to a priest. Such stories were those of many years ago, but Songkhon is still very popular even today and I have heard a similar case recently²⁶ that a Buddhist who had been able to sell his land by vowing at Songkhon, even converted to Catholic for the granted wish²⁷. As stated above, the Blessed in Songkhon is very popular for praying and vowing. Catholics say that they can pray at any church, but many are fond of going to Songkhon because they think that their wishes really come true.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the Blessed in Songkhon might have enabled the conversion of Catholicism in Thailand from a foreign religion to a religion in Thailand and therefore, Thai Catholics embody their identity through the belief and pilgrimage to Songkhon. Martyrs in Songkhon are the first Blessed in Thailand and were 'Thai' as well as the ones exemplified the Catholic philosophy. That means those Blessed that Thai Catholics worship are Thai, not the foreign ones. The miracle story that my fellow pilgrim mentioned during the pilgrimage 'the water smelled like *Thai* flavor although it was a *western* tree' is metaphoric in this sense:

²² Among those stories, a witness account that seven martyrs can be seen by the sun at dusk is talked by a number of pilgrims and the booklet of Songkhon describes a similar story about scent of martyrs' blood (Khanakamakan 1989: 63).

²³ These were recorded in the booklet to celebrate the construction of new buildings in Songkhon church (Anusorn Moranasaki 1995).

²⁴ Apart from the above, the recovery from illness of diabetes, knee shrinks, chronic coughing, gout, etc. was also reported (Anusorn Moranasaki 1995:62-68).

²⁵ In case of vow, they promise something in exchange for the favors rendered by God, like offering floral garlands, offering for a church or priest, asking supplication for the souls in purgatory at the mass.

²⁶ A Catholic friend in Turian City, Chanthaburi told me in March 2015.

²⁷ According to the Catholic who told this story to me, in Turian Church, there are two persons who converted from Buddhist by the vow at Songkhon including this person, and they attend the mass on every Sunday.

western tree seems to be a metaphor of Catholicism coming from western country and it has become Thai.

The Situations of the Catholics in Other Areas in the 1940s

The religious persecutions of Catholics in the 1940s occurred not only in Songkhon, but throughout Thailand. I would like to examine the situations in other areas, mainly Chanthaburi, together with referring to the situation in other areas.

Chanthaburi has a prominent Catholic church in Thailand. The Chanthaburi Church has more than 300 years history with congregation of about 5000 in 1940 (Surachai 2000: 90) and over 8,000 in 1995²⁸. Most of them are of Vietnamese origin and live in a big community near the Catholic Church. During my stay in Turian City in Chanthaburi 1996-1997, Catholic elders of Turian Church²⁹ gave me an account of their experiences of persecution in the 1940s. A woman in her late 80s living near Turian church³⁰ told me recalling the days of persecution in the 1940s as follows;

‘Buddhists called Catholics ‘*Yuan* (Vietnamese)’. They also called Catholics spy. A group of Buddhists came to the church and threw stones and set fire to the church. --- My brother, he was soldier and lived near the church. Although he was a Buddhist, he helped to put out the fire by cutting down a banana tree and banging the fire. There were three Catholics at the church, but they could not put out the fire because they were afraid of the Buddhists who still stayed around the sister’s house. My brother was Buddhist and he was not afraid of them, so he gave his hand. --- The church survived the total fire loss. They timed the day without a guard of the church. Those who set fire were ruffians who lived around here ’

This woman converted from Buddhism to Catholicism when she married a Catholic man, while her brother remained Buddhist. All the Catholics who knew this arson resented the matter and told me that all the Buddhists who had set fire were punished by God to die in agony. Furthermore, the Buddhist shopkeepers drove away Catholic customers with a sword and some Buddhists prevented other Buddhists from buying at the shops of Catholics³¹. Both Catholic schools in Turian City and in Chanthaburi City were closed down. Under these situations, many Catholics in Turian City moved to other places as if being refugees, mainly to the residential area of Catholic congregations near Chanthaburi Church for fear of harm from radical Buddhists.

Chanthaburi Church was built with a beautiful gothic style and had spires. The Phibun government, however, took down the spires in 1940 during war time since they suspected that Catholics were spies of France³² and regarded the spires as an indication to show a target for France. Chanthaburi Church itself survived from destruction by the radical Buddhists since the followers were united to protect the church (Surachai 2000:90). As I stated earlier, Phibun government forced non-ethnic

²⁸ Statistics of Chanthaburi Dioceses 1995.

²⁹ Its followers were 578 in 1995.

³⁰ This is a tentative name. This church is in Turian (also tentative name) City and was built in 1900. Ancestors of many followers of the church came from China at the end of 19th century.

³¹ According to the woman in her late 80s mentioned above.

³² Chanthaburi was relatively near the Cambodian (French Indochina then) border and was once under French occupation by the treaty after Franco-Siamese Crises from 1893 until 1904.

Thai and non-Buddhists to abandon their education, language and custom. The policy was certainly carried out in Chanthaburi as well. The government ordered Catholic public officials to become Buddhist and if not obey, they were persecuted³³. Sarakadii writes that women had been caught and had their hair cut, forced to wear Thai style clothes, and children had to make an obeisance to the image of Buddha, police kept close watch on religious rituals, and the Vietnamese language was prohibited (Sarakadii 1995: 116). In Chanthaburi City, Vietnamese language was still in common use among Catholics of Vietnamese origin around 1940. According to a man who was a teenager then, his grandparents, parents and himself all spoke Vietnamese as well as Thai, but those who were born after about 1940 could not speak or pray in Vietnamese anymore. This man was unwilling to talk about those days of war and religious persecution, maybe because he was then a soldier, a public official which was a difficult position due to the government's order.

Although Catholics in Chanthaburi had suffered from the government officials and Buddhist neighbors, elders made it clear that not every Buddhist was bad to them. As a woman in Turian City said above, there were Buddhists who helped Catholics like her brother. Another elderly lady³⁴ who was then nearly twenty years old said,

‘When I laid stock of goods in Chanthaburi town and transported to Turian City, nobody carried for me. But there were good people among Buddhists and such people transported them. Not every person was harsh, but there were both bad and good ones. There were ruffians and non-ruffians. During religious persecution, neighbors advised me definitely not to go out because guys would tear off clothes to humiliate me.’

Another elderly man said to me after the story of arson of Turian Church, answering my question how Buddhist acquaintances had behaved in those days,

‘Not every Buddhist but only some people were bad. Only the people who acted like a tool of the government were wicked. Catholics have Buddhist relatives by marrying with Buddhist. Those people helped each other. That's that.’

From those narratives, we have learned that such Buddhists as relatives helped Catholics. The wicked matters had mostly done by ruffians and those who acted as a tool of government. Still, considering the Catholics in Turian City had to escape to a Catholic community in Chanthaburi, the persecution would not be gentle.

As for the persecutions of Catholics throughout Thailand, the details are written in the book on another Blessed in Thailand, Blessed Nicolas Bunkerd Kitbamrung³⁵. According to the book, missionaries in the northeast Thailand were deported and those in the other areas were forced to come to Bangkok. Some Thai priests escaped and hid himself, others were caught and pressed to abandon their religion. Governors, district headmen, or the members of the patriotic group (*Khana Luad Thai*) had called persons who held a position of leadership among Catholics for a meeting and threatened them until they agreed to convert. Many Catholics, either men or women, were caught on suspicion of spy (Large 2000: 43-44) and public officials

³³ According to a man in his late 60s in Turian City.

³⁴ Her husband was Buddhist, but was already dead when I interviewed her.

³⁵ Father Nicholas was arrested as a spy on January 1941 and died in the prison because of tuberculosis on January 12, 1944, then is beatified on January 27, 2000.

of the Catholics had a trial or were dismissed (Surachai 2000: 51). As for children, the Catholic schools throughout Thailand were closed down and children were forced to go to public schools of which the teachers were members of the patriotic group, and to make an obeisance to the image of Buddha (Large 2000: 44, 45). The patriotic group (*Khana Luad Thai*) had much influence on Thai people in those days. They saw Catholicism as a religion of enemy and burnt or destroyed churches (Surachai 2000: 38, 50). Some churches were used as lodgings of Buddhist monks, schools of Buddhist, or even Buddhist temples (Surachai 2000: 69-71). According to Father Surachai, the persecutions weakened in Bangkok³⁶ after the end of war with France in May 1941, but it got worsen in the some parts like Chanthaburi. In northeast Thailand, the persecutions were almost completed because there was no Catholic to convert and no church to destroy anymore by May 1942, but recurred after the missionary work started again. Ultimately, the persecutions in the 1940s came to an end after the August 1944 when Pridi rose to power and the religious freedom was approved again (Surachai 2000: 106).

Living inside the Same Society ‘Yuu Nai Sangkhom’

Now, Catholic younger generations know about the persecutions in 1940s by hearing from their elders. They also know what happened in Songkhon. Pilgrimage to the seven martyrs is popular among them. The persecution in the 1940s, however, seems to be a long-gone incident for those who did not experience the era. When I asked about the persecution in Songkhon, a woman in her 40s said to me: ‘The policeman (Lue) died recently. Someone said that he had regretted what he had done in Songkhon. It was his duty, so it couldn’t be helped.’³⁷

In taking such a present situation and elders’ attitudes toward the persecutions into account, it seems that Catholics showed the attitude of avoiding conflict, more lenient and dispassionate as generation and time goes by: an elderly man of public official in those days did not say anything about the matter instead of accusing; elders in Turian City tended to make it clear that ‘not every Buddhist was bad’; and, as a recent case, a woman sympathized with the police officer in the martyr incident. Thus, they have not perceived the memories of persecution as a distinct confrontation between Buddhists and Catholics despite the bitter history for Catholics. What made them assume such attitudes toward the persecutions? Their attitudes stem from the change of their position in the ‘society’.

Nowadays Catholics in Thailand see themselves as Thai regardless of their ethnic origin and think that they share the same society with Buddhists. Buddhist Thais also see Catholics in the same way. I use the word ‘society’ here as ‘a circle of people living in the same residential area while having relationship under the same order of attending important ceremonial occasions like weddings and funerals’ as an equivalent Thai word for society ‘*sangkhom*’³⁸. Some Catholics in Turian City themselves use the word ‘*sangkhom*’ for the explanation of their act of attending ceremonies of Buddhist neighbors or contributing to Buddhist ceremonies.

Until the late 20th century, however, Catholics and Buddhists were not in the same society³⁹. Catholics had lived in the place protected by missionaries until the

³⁶ The catholic community of Vietnamese origin in Samsen, Bangkok similarly suffered during this time (Ngaamphit 2002).

³⁷ Interview in 2015.

³⁸ ‘*sangkhom*’ means ‘a circle of people who have relationship with each other under the same order or law’ according to Thai dictionary.

³⁹ Catholics, of course, have worked as soldiers, merchants or government officials in Thailand since the 16th century, but that was different from living in the same society.

mid-19th century or the early 20th century. After those periods, they still did not live in the same society with Buddhists for many decades in the sense that they did not socialize in ceremonial occasions as such although there were small numbers of intermarriages between Catholic and Buddhist⁴⁰. Even many years have passed after the war, the socialization between Catholic and Buddhist seemed to be still difficult in the situation that many aspects of people's life are involved in the religious matters. This situation, however, had gradually changed due to the policy of the Catholic Church and the Thai government.

As for the policy of the Catholic Church, it changed its policy toward other religion in the Second Vatican Council held in 1962-65 to accept, respect and even encourage the social and cultural value of other religions⁴¹. Before the Council, the Catholic Church had tended to be severe with things related to non-Christian religions. In the 1940s, the Church prohibited followers to make a donation even to the school attached to a Buddhist temple⁴². Things did not change easily. Even in the mid-1980s, sisters of Catholic school seemed to be severe on Catholic students joining the Buddhist ceremonies⁴³. But with the guidance of Thai Catholic authority in 1991⁴⁴ together with priests' teachings, the policy of Catholic Church became widespread to the Catholics of Turian Church in the 1990s. In this period, the school attached to Turian Church started joining a candle procession of Buddhist Lent season as well as holding a procession of Christmas Eve in the city, and in both processions, both Catholic and Buddhist students have taken part in. Moreover, because of the Church approval of marriage with non-Christian around the mid-20th century and of choice of children's religion by the 1970, the intermarriage between Catholic and Buddhist has become much easier and common⁴⁵. So, many of Catholic households had Buddhist members together with Catholic members⁴⁶ by the end of the 20th century. Under these situations, it has become ordinary matters for Catholics to help Buddhist relatives, friends and neighbors in the Buddhist ceremonial occasions.

The national integration policy should have facilitated the situation of the Catholics in the same society with Buddhists as the same Thai. As we have seen earlier, Phibun government propagated national integration policy in which non-Buddhist religions was rejected and non-Thai ethnic characteristics were abandoned. Later governments have also advanced the unity of nation, but they have approved of

⁴⁰ For example, at the end of 19th century, Buddhist parents and relatives were ashamed of their daughter marrying with a Catholic and moved from the Buddhist village to another place. Around 1930, such a situation continued. An elderly woman told me that her Catholic husband took her to the place where Buddhists enjoyed dancing, and then Buddhists even stopped dancing because they were afraid of Catholics. An elderly Catholic woman born around the mid-1920s who married a Buddhist said that there was no problem with her Buddhist husband because he understood her religion, but recollected that there might have been some problems with his relatives.

⁴¹ In *Nostra Aetate*: 'Declaration Of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1965.

⁴² According to a priest in Chanthaburi. Also in Turian Church, Buddhist monk was not allowed to enter the church.

⁴³ A woman then a junior high school student was censured for being unfaithful when she slipped away from the religious class to see rituals for the Buddhist Lent season with Buddhist students of the Catholic school.

⁴⁴ Declared as a Proclamation of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand. This proclamation was declared in response to the situation that Catholic followers still hesitated over how to act in concern with non-Christian religious ceremonies of neighbors. In it, the Church instructed followers to figure out their action depending on the situation, like avoiding offense against important matters of Buddhist host.

⁴⁵ For example, the total number of marriage of the Turian Church member from 1981 to 1995 was 70, among which, only 13 was the marriage between Catholics and the other 57 was the marriage with Buddhist.

⁴⁶ The number of household which had Catholic member in the center of Turian City was 64 in 1997. Among them, the household which was composed of only Catholic members was merely 27 and other 37 households had members of Buddhist together with Catholic.

the worship of all religions although they have continued the policy to lessen the non-Thai ethnic characteristics.

After these changes, in the middle of 1990, Catholics in Turian City attended the family rituals of Buddhist neighbors, friends or colleagues. Some made a donation to Buddhist ceremonial occasions if somebody came to collect. With regard to attending those rituals or making such contributions, Catholics explained by using the word '*sangkhom*' to emphasize social relationships. One Catholic woman said,

‘If there is a funeral ceremony, I will go to help. It is a way of social relationship (*beep sangkhom*). If we help them, they would also help us. If we don’t help them, we will be said to be a narrow-minded person, as we are in the same society (*yuu nai sangkhom*).’⁴⁷

When talking about donation to Buddhist ceremonies, others also explain they would do it ‘for society (*phua sangkhom*)’, or because she respected the society (*thuu sangkhom*)⁴⁸ and other wondered how Buddhists saw her if she did not donate in spite of living among them. A middle aged female teacher of a public school said ‘I contribute (to Buddhist ceremonial occasions) not as a religion, but as the same Thai.’⁴⁸ From those explanations, it would be clear that they are conscious of being in the same society with Buddhists. But it was not the same for the elderly generation who were born before the war. Concerning elders, a woman said that when she was a child (around mid-1970s to early-80s), she often heard from elders that ‘Buddhists live in the Buddhist sphere and Catholics live in the Catholic sphere’. And in her opinion, such elders think so even present days⁴⁹, so that they could not accept donating to Buddhist matters.

Conclusion

Tagawa argued that public memories, which means various interpretations of history of various people shared in the public space, is the effective concept to understand not only the past but also the present and the future because it is related to the power relations and loyalties to their own or public cultures in the process of communication and recognition (Tagawa 2005:8, 15, 37). Likewise, the memories of religious persecutions in the 1940s in Thailand have been reconstructed and handed down by the Catholic Church of Thailand and by its followers, and when they recognize and talk about it or translate into action, the power relationship between Buddhists and Catholics as well as their loyalties to Catholic faith are taken into consideration.

Now the generation of remembering the past persecutions has almost faded away, Catholic followers seem to think that it is not necessarily needed to pass down the memories of religious persecutions in the context of present social relationship with Buddhists. On the contrary, The Catholic Church of Thailand needs and uses those memories not for the social relationships, but for Catholic faith. It highlighted the history of religious persecutions just as a background for the creation of seven martyrs, and the memories of persecutions were replaced and converted to the story of ideal model as Catholics. The Church reconstructed the public memory with the

⁴⁷ But as for donation, not every Catholic in Turian City contributes. Some explained because there were tricky people.

⁴⁸ As she said clearly, Catholics in Turian City acted in accordance with their religious beliefs such as not holding their hands to Buddhist monks during chanting, not joining a ordination ceremonies but just handing celebration money to the host etc (see detail in my doctoral thesis, chapter 3 (Harada 2006)).

⁴⁹ Her explanation was done in 1997.

intension to create and strengthen the followers' religious faith through the worship to the Blessed and pilgrimage to the place. That is to say, the memories of persecutions in the 1940s would continue to exist because of the belief and pilgrimage to the Blessed.

Seven Martyrs in Songkhon has a great significance for Thai Catholics because they, in a sense, enabled the conversion of Catholicism in Thailand from a foreign religion to a religion in Thailand. They are the first Blessed in Thailand and were 'Thai' as well as the ones exemplified Catholicism. Thai Catholics, therefore, can embody their identity through the belief and pilgrimage to Songkhon. And the belief and pilgrimage are not only for the Catholic followers, but also is indeed the very thing that both Catholics and Buddhists participate together as relatives and neighbors despite the bitter past between them. By the Buddhists' participation in the pilgrimage, Catholics would feel approved and proud of their religion in the middle of Buddhist majorities.

Also, the belief and pilgrimage to the Blessed affects the way of looking at Catholicism by Buddhists: they once saw it as a foreign religion which had nothing to do with them but changed to see it as the one with powerful god. Those Buddhists integrated the God of Catholicism into their religious worldview by regarding the Catholic God as a powerful being who has a great power enough to grant their prayers and, in some cases, they even converted to the religion. Even if the Buddhists converted because of looking for the God's power at first, they would remain Catholic if they think that Catholic teaches also good teachings. Thus, the beliefs and the pilgrimage become a foothold to arose the Buddhists' interest.

As we have seen by now, Catholicism was once regarded as a foreign religion and the Catholics suffered and experienced religious persecutions in the 1940s because of anti-France feeling as well as the government's national integration policy which was hostile to non-Buddhist religion. In such situation, the martyrdom of Songkhon happened. In late years, the memories of religious persecutions in the 1940s are treated by Catholic followers as the ones which should not be emphasized in order to hold a good relationship with the Buddhists. Their attitudes were affected by the change in their social situation: the situation living within the same society as the Buddhists.

Thus, the Catholic followers perceived the history through consideration of the social relationship with Buddhist majorities and the Catholic Church also pay attention to avoid friction in the Buddhist society, while, on the other hand, Catholic Church of Thailand converted the memories of persecutions in the 1940s to the constructive action of worship and pilgrimage to the Blessed just for the religious purpose of their own. And that action contributes the Thai Catholics strengthening their beliefs and holding their religion as well as having the pride in their religious identities in the Buddhist Thailand. It also contributes the change of Buddhist view on Catholicism, which would change the future status of Catholicism in Thailand. In this way, the situation of Buddhism and Catholicism in the Thai society is fluid and that will affect the perception and reconstruction of the memory of the history of the times.

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Other articles

Annual Statistics of the Chanthaburi Dioceses

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