

Buddhist monks' cremation ceremonies break the bank in impoverished Myanmar

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MAWLAMYINE, Myanmar (RNS) Two years ago, residents of the village of Taung Bone donated an estimated \$120,000 to finance the cremation ceremony of Badana Kawnarnya, the chief abbot of a local monastery. By contrast, the average annual salary in Mon State, situated along Myanmar's southern coast, is \$1,000, and most wedding receptions cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

Buddhists in Mon State have long spent vast sums—more than 100 times an average annual salary—on elaborate cremation ceremonies to mark the passing of influential monks.

With regional development lagging, critics want more of that money shifted to education, health, and social welfare. The ceremonies' defenders say such a move could stoke social tensions in this already volatile country.

Most of the money raised for Badana Kawnarnya's funeral was spent staging plays, musical performances, boxing competitions, and a modeling pageant honoring the recently deceased monk.

"Expensive cremation and funeral ceremonies double as a way to entertain community members and to impress visitors," said Badanda Sandawbartha, chief monk of a monastery in Paung Township, Mon State.

He says criticism of these rites are inappropriate because the ceremonies represent the public's last chance to show reverence to people in his position.

Even though these elaborate cremation ceremonies are financed through voluntary donations rather than taxes, some residents are concerned that the money is spent inefficiently.

“What is the outcome of these ceremonies? Unnecessary millions . . . spent on entertainment shows?” said local community development project manager Min Aung Htoo. “We all know that education, health, economy, and general knowledge are lagging at the moment. If we spent so much money on these sectors instead of using it for cremation ceremonies, entertainment, and gambling, we could expect a brighter future for our young generation.”

Buddhists in Myanmar are notoriously generous to their religious institutions, so much so that the Charities Aid Foundation placed Myanmar in first place alongside the U.S. in its 2014 World Giving Index. That generosity can sometimes turn competitive.

In especially poor townships, some locals turn to gambling to try to help finance monks’ cremation ceremonies, which often only serves to exacerbate their financial straits. Gambling is also sometimes featured as part of the festivities in a cremation ceremony, which has critics.

“We face problems sometimes, not because of the ceremonies themselves, but because of people’s egos and pride,” said Nai Oak Sar, a leader of the All Mon Region Democracy Party.

Cremation ceremonies can also lead to clashes over the use of communal public space. Most ceremonies last one week, but some stretch on for longer, putting pressure on cramped quarters and an already busy calendar of outdoor public festivals.

Elaborate cremation ceremonies are not unique to Myanmar. Neighboring Thailand recently saw a 100-day celebration for the funeral of a chief monk in Bangkok. Monks were invited with offers of food and gifts, but instead of live music shows and gambling, they celebrated with basic chanting. Money was not formally collected but people were free to donate if they wished.

Nai Kasauh Mon, director of Human Rights Foundation of Monland, said that some people celebrate the cremation ceremonies of respected monks as a recognition of human mortality, but he worries that others participate only to enjoy the entertainment and gambling, which he considers a violation of Buddha’s teachings.

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