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SUBHEADLINE: Cartoons poking fun at the misbehaviour of monks may be a thing of the past if proposed amendments to the Sangha Act become law. And that would be a step backward

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Obese, proud and full of gusto, a group of monks emerge from behind a pagoda. One impertinently holds a bottle of alcohol, while most have skulls in lieu of heads and seem to be living on borrowed time.

In front of the pagoda's walls is a sign that reads Kromkan Sassana (Religious Affairs Department), rising above the ground behind a broken-down spirit house in the midst of a pile of garbage _ used objects such as alms bowls, but also empty alcohol bottles, pictures of naked women, empty cigarette packs, condoms and more. The department is tagged Krom Lon Meethun (The Department of Adulterous Bald Heads).

Another illustration depicts a lay person handing a candle to an elderly monk who has no eyes, standing with a stick, labelled as a representative of the Elders' Association.

In another window is a short-legged dog rigged with glasses, bearing the caption: ``The abbot of Dhammakaya temple.'' The dog looks mockingly at the Judiciary Code and Religious Bill, trampled beneath its paws.

Yet another recaptures the ``hare and the tortoise'' story, with Phra Dhammachayo as the tortoise, and the Religious Affairs Department as the sleepy, complacent hare, stretched out on a hammock.

Inspired by current events and the scandals that have taken place over the past few years, these samples of corrosive editorial cartoons once adorned the editorial pages of Thai-language newspapers like Siam Rath (under the stamp of cartoonist Phijjan), Matichon (Muen) and Khao Sod (Kai Jae).

In their time, and in turn, these illustrations raised many eyebrows and

brought smiles or giggles to many faces. However, such sketches are mostly gone and well forgotten now, buried in the beleaguered storerooms of newspaper publishing companies.

But for prominent Buddhist scholar Louis Gabaude _ based mostly in Chiang Mai for the past 30 years, and a member of the prestigious Ecole Francaise D'Extreme Orient (Efeo) and author of innumerable books, monographs, articles and lectures on contemporary Buddhism and the famed monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu _ these cartoons and many others are like many precious gems collected in a search spanning more than two decades. His vast collection of illustrations, begun in the late 1970s, will be assembled into a book featuring Thai religious imagery.

Although poles apart from traditionally devout images, the numerous editorial cartoons which Gabaude, 59, has gathered from the Thai print media hold a special position in his discursive reasoning.

The scholar's favourite research area, which he regularly discusses during classes and special lectures in Paris (La Sorbonne), Lyon (Facultes Catholiques) and Silpakorn University, is precisely the evolution and history of ideas in contemporary Buddhism.

``With the development of a free and independent press, criticism of monks has dramatically increased in the last 20 years. One channel for this criticism is the drawing of cartoons,' or so says a poster put up by the National Museum Volunteers to announce the recent lecture given by Gabaude on ``Buddhism Seen Through Cartoons'' at the National Museum.

``Cartoons are not only used for teaching and edifying purposes as before, but for pointing out the flaws of contemporary Buddhism; sexual misconduct, money scandals, doctrinal deviations, etc.''

This rather new role assumed by cartoons appears highly meaningful to Gabaude.

``It reveals a new tendency of society, knowing that these deviations have long been hushed up. These cartoons are the expression of an elite as well, each of the sketches having received the backing of editors,' he explains. ``Drawings often convey more than words and might say things people wouldn't dare to write.''

Artist Suluck Boonpan, aka Kai Jae of Khao Sod newspaper, adds: ``We don't have any power as such but we have a voice. We don't criticise directly but

in a circuitous way. We communicate through symbols. We try and stir reflection and point at what doesn't run smoothly. We tend to tickle, to titillate. We rarely generate anger, unlike columnists.'

The eloquent sketches that Gabaude has collected since 1976 from English- and Thai-language newspapers and magazines in Thailand were all created in the wake of a string of front-page scandals _ dating back to Kittivuddho Bhikkhu, who worked closely with the military once and suggested that killing a communist to preserve the nation, religion, and the monarchy, was not sinful. Phra Bodhirak of Santi Asoke _ who was unceremoniously defrocked after criticising what he saw as a tide of decadence infecting Thai Buddhism _ advocated an all-round purification of the Sangha, after Nikorn Thammavathe, Phra Pongsak Techadhammo, Bhavana Buddho and Phra Yantra Amaro were entangled in sex scandals.

These cartoons also have a dynamism and identity of their own. According to Gabaude, they are the outcome of a long evolution, fuelled both by an oral tradition of humour and criticism and the legacy left by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, on the widespread use of illustrations to convey clear messages _ not to mention the 19th-century King Rama VI, who became the country's first cartoonist by caricaturing a member of his Council of Ministers.

``To start with, drawings and paintings were used to preach the core of the message, trying to translate visually the master's thought. But from an iconographic and narrative tradition emerged digressing images,' comments Gabaude.

``Yet even on the mural paintings of numerous temples, humour is a recurring characteristic _ you can often find small scenes in some little corner depicting wrong behaviour.

``According to Buddhist texts and tradition, to put it briefly, criticism of bad monks is a duty while criticism of good monks is very contemptible. Yet the Vinaya (Disciplinary Rules for the Sangha) makes it actually very difficult to accuse a monk _ solid proof of errant behaviour must be established before one can condemn him or defrock him, as the Phra Yantra saga recently proved,' the scholar said.

Humour and jokes, giving a bit of a rough ride to deviant monks, have been

around for quite some time. Books compiling rural jokes such as Duay Panya lae Khwam Rak (With Wisdom and Love), a compilation of oral literature and villagers' jokes in northern Thailand published by the Siam Society in 1976, or Jiakom: Ruangkhankhan Lanna, compiled by Dr Udom Rungruangsi of Chiang Mai University in 1985, are noteworthy examples.

In this latest publication, which includes 354 jokes _ and nearly 20 percent of them about monks _ the author states that the number of jokes involving monks and Buddhism bears witness to the importance of Buddhism in northern Thai society and of the need for villagers to express their frustration over the shortcomings of monks, whom they are forced to respect in public.

``A tradition of criticism already existed. These cartoons are just an extension of this oral tradition,' Gabaude points out.

Another extension or continuation the scholar seems to identify is the process of ``secularisation' that somewhat reflects a loss of the religion's sacred aura.

``People are mostly ready to see this type of cartoon, sometimes very caustic and yet passed off without anyone raising an eyebrow. This is because of the secularisation of religion _ the further we go, the more religion is becoming another social feature, deprived of any social or political protection. Religion is subject to criticism, and monks can also be presented in the same light, like non-clerics,' explains the scholar.

Yet if this conceivable evolution is to be confirmed, it would follow the path of Western religious traditions which can arouse heated debates and are sometimes even straightforwardly criticised.

There is, however, one major exception. ``The big difference, when compared to Western caricatures, is that Thai cartoons are not blatantly critical. They pose as being apologetic _ that is surely why they dare to be so caustic. They aspire to defend authentic Buddhism and stand in the name of the defence of a preserved Buddhism,' observes Gabaude.

Thai cartoonists _ an expanding species, growing in proportion with the number of newspapers and magazines _ would not beg to differ. And touching on the question of freedom of expression, they hasten to mention that

institutions in Thailand _ whether the monarchy or religion _ are inviolable and that cartoons turning down the corner of rebellious monks are rather infrequent anyway. Self-censorship exists.

Artist Boonpan comments: ``One has to be very careful when dealing with institutions. There are many diverging viewpoints that must be given consideration. It is subtle and difficult, especially as a cartoon tends to involve the position of the whole editorial team.''

``Usually (when any scandal arises) there is a period of incredulity, during which many followers are doubtful about the authenticity of the news. One has to go easy, usually wait and make sure the event in question remains in the news before publishing anything,' ' Boonpan says.

Chuchart Mueninkul (Muen), artist, cartoonist and pre-press director of the Matichon Group, specifies: ``A cartoon would generally appear only after the society itself accepts and concludes that a particular errant monk is not worthy of wearing the saffron robe any more. Before that it is usually too sensitive.''

A French cartoonist, known only as Stephff, one of the two foreign cartoonists based in Thailand, admits that he tends to completely skip the topic of religion.

``If you consider a bad monk, you may have his picture in the paper \_ that's a different thing. But a drawing deals with symbols, it caricatures, makes a laughing stock out of it. Cartoons tend to generalise and not necessarily target a particular individual,' ' Stephff comments. ``Besides, coming from a foreigner, the message could be misunderstood.''

Some Thai cartoonists also agree with the idea of secularisation of religion that Gabaude touches upon. ``I guess it is a tendency followed by many traditions; the core teaching itself remains intact but there is confusion surrounding those who represent the religion these days,' ' comments Boonpan.

``There should be better mechanisms of regulation, with clear personal records of defrocked monks to make sure they don't end up in temples in different provinces.''

Whereas Gabaude, who published a work in 1996 entitled The Triple Crisis in Contemporary Thai Buddhism (referring to the falling numbers in the monkhood, the crisis of morality and authority) comments: ``If Buddhism is indeed going through a crisis, the crisis doesn't rest in the deviant behaviour of monks so much as it lies in the refusal or inability, by the Sangha, to really impose sanctions on bad monks or discover them early enough.''

And if that is so, one can bet that the current debate on amending the Sangha Act _ one of its provision would prevent the media from publishing or broadcasting reports tarnishing the image of Buddhism _ won't change the slightest thing.

Or may, perhaps, simply spoil all the fun.