




## **The role of religion in constructing ethnic identity: The case of Danu Son See Yar Day, a religious-based cultural festival in Myanmar**

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### ***[Abstract]***

This article explores the importance of religion and ethnic cultural performance in building the ethnic identity of the Danu people. Danu is a considerably large ethnic group in southern Shan State, Myanmar. However, until they started to organize the Danu Son See Yar Day (the DSSYD), a cultural festival based on Buddhism, their ethnic identity was unknown to the country. The invisibility of Danu ethnic identity is due to the lack of connection and unity between them. To answer the question of what the role of religion and culture in the construction of Danu ethnic identity is, I conducted this research by participating in the festival and interviewing some cultural informants who know this subject well. The result shows that by giving the opportunity to conduct religious and ethnic cultural affairs, this festival paved the way for a large gathering of Danu people which allowed them to become connected and united. More importantly, it became an essential event not only for the development of the Danu ethnic community itself, but also in maintaining harmony between them with other ethnicities through religious and cultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** Buddhism-based ethnic culture, Ethnic identity, Danu ethnic people, Danu Son See Yar Day festival, connectivity, unity.

## **Introduction**

This research examines the role of religion and culture in building the ethnic identity of the Danu ethnic people, who were not widely known in Myanmar, until a religious-based cultural festival named ‘Danu Son See Yar Day (the DSSYD)’ was organized in 2011. Unlike other events in the Danu Ethnic Community, this festival is only one decade old and is the biggest occasion where thousands of Danu people come together and conduct religious and cultural activities. It is unquestionable that these religious and cultural activities carried out during the festival reinforced the visibility of the Danu ethnic identity. However, the question as to how this fairly large ethnic group was invisible among other ethnicities remains unanswered, and further, how exactly they became better known to the people of Myanmar over the past decade after having organized the DSSYD festival annually, is a subject that is worthy of treatment. Regarding this interesting change, I conducted field research, including some interviews with Danu elders who contributed to this process of transformation.

To give an overview of the role played by religion and culture in the construction of Danu ethnic identity through this cultural festival, let us start with some relevant questions below:

Who are the Danu people?

Why was their ethnic identity invisible in the past?

What are the reasons for the visibility of their ethnic identity at present?

What is the role of religion and culture in this episode?

### ***Who are the Danu people?***

Of the 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, Kachin, Kayah, Kayan or Karin, Chin, Mon, Burmese, Rakhine and Shan, are the groups that have their states and divisions. In addition to these eight ethnic groups, more than 120 ethnic groups live across the country. Danu is one of many groups that have no state or division even though it is a fairly large ethnic group compared to other ethnicities. The Danu population is around 400,000,

the 4<sup>th</sup> largest ethnic group in Shan State and the 10<sup>th</sup> in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>. However, the ethnic identity of the Danu people is surprisingly unknown to the country. In addition, unlike other large ethnic groups and until 2018, they did not have ethnic symbols such as a Danu-flag, song, ethnic day and dress.

Until 2010, when Myanmar's new constitution was confirmed by the military regime, the rights of ethnic groups, especially those which did not have an autonomous administrative zone, were ignored by the government. Compared with the Shan and Pa'O ethnic groups, whose populations are larger than Danu, Danu's presence in Shan State was not marked. At that time neither other ethnicities nor the Danu themselves showed much interest in the Danu ethnic identity.

Thus, nothing was offered but unsatisfactory explanations whenever a Danu person tried to answer the question: "Why are the Danu called Danu?!" Local historians and contemporary scholars have suggested different ideas regarding the very name of "Danu". Some say that "Danu was appointed by his duty to protect the royal family by using cross-bows while some believe that they were tax collectors, who lived in Shan State, for the kings of Pagan".<sup>2</sup> And in deed, we find the word "Danu" literally meaning an "arch" or an "archer" in Pāli, an ancient Prakrit Indian language in which is written the scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, the official/majority religion of Myanmar. Others explain the word Danu via their memorized legends. According to some of these legends and ethnogenesis narratives, the Danu people were originally the protectors of ancient Burmese kings and constituted a part of the royal army of the king. They were responsible for protecting the king and his ministers at all times and wherever they traveled across the country, particularly in areas remote from the king's headquarters. As such, some of these Danu guards would go to a certain place in advance before the arrival of the king there, to check

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<sup>1</sup> Lwin, Min. "Archaeologic Evidence from Makkhaya Old City." PhD diss., MERAL Portal, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Aung, Nay Soe. "Danu a myo thar thamaing (History of Danu National)." *Tanuggyi, Myanmar: The committee of Danu literature* (2012).

any possible danger. In the course of time, some of them began to settle permanently in places that the king visited more frequently, thus forming a unique ethnic group different from other groups in those regions. This is one of the ethnogenesis narratives told by some Danu people, and there are other legends of a similar nature. However, since these are local legends or stories, they lack reliable historical evidence. Therefore, the question of why the Danu people are named “Danu” is still unclear.

***Why was Danu ethnic identity invisible in the past?***

In the context of discussing the invisibility of the Danu ethnic group, it is necessary to mention one or two distinct neighboring ethnicities which have unique languages and cultures, and hold an autonomous administrative region. The Shan, who enjoy the condition of being the largest ethnic group in the Shan State, are widely known nationally and internationally because of their name as a region of Myanmar, and also because of their language and unique culture. Shan people speak the Shan language which is totally different from Burmese, and with which they write their own literature. Just as Burmese Buddhists have translated and transliterated the three Pitakas (Buddhist scriptures) from Pali to the Burmese language, Shan people have done the same in their own language.

Besides language, Shan people also have their own unique ethnic dress, food, dance style, and musical instruments. Further, while their ethnic dress is used exclusively by them, some of their foods, especially noodles, are famous all over the country. More importantly, they also have a national holiday, national flag, and even an independent army, which has fought against the government for decades for the “liberation of the Shan State”, according to the leaders of Shan people. In short, Shan people are well united by the unique character of their lifestyle and culture. Thus, the ethnic identity of Shan people is well established in the uniqueness of their geographic home, language and culture.

Pa’O people are the second largest ethnic group in Shan State. They can be divided into highland and lowland Pa’O. Highland Pa’O live around Taunggyi, the capital city of Shan State, while lowland Pa’O are found around Thaton city of Mon State, in southern Myanmar. Like the

Shan, Pa'O have their own unique language and literature, which is similar neither to Shan nor to Burmese. While the Shan language is in the Tai-Kadai language family, the Pa'O belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family ("Myanmar - Languages," n.d.; "Sino-Tibetan languages | Definition, Characteristics, Examples, Descent, & Facts | Britannica.com," n.d.). In addition, their ethnic dress, music, and festivals, are also very different from other ethnicities. And although the majority of Pa'O live in a large part of southern Shan State without any particular region bearing their ethnic name, yet, like the Shan people, they have a national day, ethnic flag, and an independent army. A fairly famous cultural festival performed by Pa'O people is the "Fire Rocket Festival", celebrated around June or July<sup>3</sup>. According to their legends and oral tradition, this festival takes place at the end of summer and at the beginning of the rainy season to bring the rain at the right time, that is to say just before the start of their agricultural season. The Pa'O religion is primarily Buddhism, so most of their festivals are related to Buddhism one way or another.

Even though a small area of autonomous administration within Shan state was assigned to the Danu ethnicity by the U Thein Sein government<sup>4</sup>, yet religion and cultural remain to be the main features through which the Danu people exercise their ethnic identity. This is why the cultural festivals of the Danu people came to be very important for any study of their identity. Since festivals occur in specific places and present special elements of culture belonging to a community, as Getz<sup>5</sup>, Hall<sup>6</sup>, De Bres and Davis (2001) concluded, they then become an important phenomenon in the study of ethnic identity<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, the '*Danu Son See Yar Day*' festival, where thousands of Danu people perform Buddhism-based cultural performances, became

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<sup>3</sup> "Rocket festival thrills tourists and appeals to gods for rain," *The Nation*, Accessed February 11, 2019, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/breakingnews/30345281>

<sup>4</sup> U Thein Sein government was constituted of retired military leaders and was known as the first democratic government after the military regime from 2010 to 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Getz, Donald. *Festivals, special events, and tourism*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, C. *Hallmark tourist events*, London: Belhaven Press. 1992b.

<sup>7</sup> Kahuno, Maryanne Njeri, "Constructing identity through festivals: The case of Lamu Cultural Festival in Kenya," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pretoria, 2017), 5.

a very important event in constructing their ethnic identity. For they could build up a strong connection among themselves and have become united through this cultural practice.

### **What are the reasons for the increasing visibility of Danu ethnic identity in recent years?**

In discussing the increasing visibility of the Danu ethnic identity, it is important to mention the assignment of a Danu Self-Administered Zone (the DSAZ) by the central government and the Danu Literature Culture and Regional Development Association of Pindaya town<sup>8</sup> (the DLCRDA). For, they were the fundamental reasons for organizing the DSSYD festival through which Danu people established a strong connection and the unity between themselves.

According to U Kyaw Saw, who was one of the two Danu ethnic delegates during both constitutional conventions, the first one held from 1993 to 1996 in *Kyaikkasan-kwin*<sup>9</sup> in Yangon, and the second from 2004 to 2008 at *Nyaung-na-bin-sakan*,<sup>10</sup> in Hmawbhi; though the DSAZ was confirmed in 1995 April 7 during the first National Convention, it became officially assigned by the central government only in August 2010<sup>11</sup>. He also stated that this was one vital reason for organizing the DSSYD festival because members of the DLCRDA were very motivated to hold a festival where the Danu people from different areas can embark on religious and cultural activities together<sup>12</sup>

The DLCRDA was established, with the help of U Tin Nain Thein, a former commander in the Burmese army, and U Siw Aung Myat, a former minister of Shan State, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2009<sup>13</sup>. The DLCRDA was

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<sup>8</sup> There are similar Danu associations in other Danu dominated regions.

<sup>9</sup> This is a wide assembling area, where big political and cultural events used to take place, in Thin-kann-kyaune township, Yangon.

<sup>10</sup> Nyaung-na-bin-sakan is a place where the second national convention took place. It is situated in Hmawbhi, at the northern outskirts of Yangon.

<sup>11</sup> Kyaw Saw, 2016, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Kyaw Saw, personal communication, January 7, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> This is a meeting handout I was given by one DLCRDA member.

the only Danu association founded prior to the assignment of the Danu Self-Administered Zone (the DSAZ).

According to U Soe Naing, the former chair of the DLCRDA, the members of DLCRDA were very motivated by the assigning of DSAZ to make their ethnicity connected and united. U Soe Naing also said he knew that their ethnic identity was invisible due to the absence of connection between Danu ethnic people from one region to another. Thus, the members of DLCRDA arranged several meetings to make a great cultural festival which later became the DSSYD. From that time onwards, in order to make the information about the upcoming DSSYD festival known, the members of DLCRDA travelled from town to town and village to village where Danu people were living<sup>14</sup>. Throughout their traveling, they persuaded the people to attend the festival and participate in it by performing either Danu cultural dances or songs. This was one of the primary reasons advanced by DLCRDA for the celebration of the festival.

As their first priority was cultural affairs, they knew that the first thing they had to do was to encourage people to wear their traditional dress during ceremonies and celebrations particularly the ones related with religion and culture. For this they had to help people to fashion Danu traditional dress both for men and women. As a result of this hard work many Danu people became aware of the importance of wearing their traditional dress. However, it took several years until they came to the final version of their traditional dress. The final version of the ethnic dress code was approved only by 2017 November 27, when the Danu community held the 'Danu National Conference (the DNC)'<sup>15</sup>.

In short, the attempt made by DLCRDA members was very successful because a lot of Danu people participated in the DSSYD festival from the first time up to the present; which is the ninth celebration

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<sup>14</sup> U Soe Naing, personal communication, March 24, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> U Soe Naing, personal communication, March 24, 2019.

of it<sup>16</sup>. More importantly, the unity of Danu people through this festival led to the following organization of the Danu National Conference (the DNC) in 2017, and the subsequent establishment of the Danu National Affairs Organization (the D.N.A.O) in 2018 that now has supreme power in the organization of Danu ethnic communal affairs. Danu elders who I interviewed affirmed that their ethnic identity became known to the country out of these two events; the DNC and the D.N.A.O<sup>17</sup>.

***What is the role of religion and culture in constructing Danu ethnic identity?***

The role of religion and culture in the construction of Danu ethnic identity is undeniably significant because no one could imagine how else would Danu identity be expressed without religious and cultural activities performed during the DSSYD celebration. This is quite reasonable given that almost 100% of Danu people practice Buddhism<sup>18</sup>. The practice of a single unified religion made things easier for Danu leaders when they tried to persuade the Danu people to participate in this religious cultural event, which would have been impossible if their beliefs were diverse in considerable numbers.

According to U Soe Naing the former chair of the DLCRDA, members of DLCRDA were successful in persuading Danu people to engage in culture and religious activities, from the very first time of organizing the DSSYD festival. In this case, if the majority of Danu people were not practicing the same religion, Buddhism, their attempt may end up resulting nothing but dispute between Danu people themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> U Chit Sein & U Soe Naing, personal communication, 24 March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> U Win Wanna Win & Daw Khin Mya Gyi, personal communications, March 29, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> According to Joshua Project conducted many years ago, out of 115, 000 people, 90% of Danu people practice Buddhism, 8% practice ethnic religion and 2% practice Christianity ("Danu in Myanmar (Burma) Ethnic People Profile," n.d.). I was told by many of my interviewees that Danu population is about 400,000 and they are 100% Buddhists. I tried to find precise data about the Danu population during my fieldwork but unfortunately, I couldn't get it and was told by one Danu leader that it's impossible to obtain any precise statistics about any ethnicity due to the situation of political instability in Myanmar.



Nonetheless, given practicing the same religion, they could easily attract people to take part in the DSSYD festival where they perform Buddhism-based cultural performance.

Additionally, we cannot neglect the role of Buddhist monks when discussing Danu identity because Danu people are very devoted to the religious mendicants. There have always been some appointed Buddhist monks who took part in giving ethical advice in every Danu ethnic organization including in the D.N.A.O. Some interesting information highlighting the role of Buddhist monks in the Danu ethnic community was related to me by an informant thus:

“We have to recognize that religion plays a very important role for the Danu community. As we are all Buddhists, we have the possibility to be easily united under the valuable advice of our devoted monks. Otherwise, we couldn’t even think of making any of the success that we have achieved by now. What makes us even more successful in Danu ethnicity affairs is the achievement of Venerable Viriyananda who has just passed the highest level of Pāli and Buddhist scriptures examination named *Tipitakadhara*, in Myanmar”.<sup>19</sup>

“Tipitakadhara” means someone who is like the storehouse of the pristine teaching of the Buddha. In Myanmar, Tipitakadharas are chosen by a board of other Tipitakadharas and pāli experts every year. Throughout the past seventy years, only 14 monks have successfully passed the exam and have been conferred with Tipitakadharas titles. The last among them is Ven. Viriyananda who became to be known as the Danu Tipitakadhara-Sayadaw. Due to his achievement, he is the most prominent figure in the Danu ethnic community in the present time. Danu leaders from the D.N.A.O always approach him for his guidance and suggestions for their community as he is considered to be a *Suta-Buddha*<sup>20</sup> by them (*Pa-hta-*

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<sup>19</sup> Daw Khin Mya Gyi, personal communication, March 29, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> According to Burmese tradition, Suta-Buddha refers to a monk who is well-versed in Buddhist texts.

*ma-a-kyaing danu a myo thar nyi lar kan mow com.*<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is clear that the role of religion, here it is Buddhism, is one of the most essential reasons for constructing Danu ethnic identity.

This became clearer when the DSSYD cultural festival is thoroughly observed. Here I shall highlight some facts I learned from the festival that approve the vitality of religion for Danu ethnic identity and harmony among ethnicities. The facts are (a) this festival itself is part of a religious festival, (b) *what the Danu people conduct in the festival relates in one way or the other to religion*, and (d) *that religious-based culture really motivates connectivity and unity in the Danu society*.

**(a) this festival itself is part of a religious festival.** The DSSYD is a week-long event where Danu people all over the country gather together at a small town named Pindaya in western Shan State. It is not an old cultural celebration like the Danu traditional *Tatakpwal*<sup>22</sup> and *Tabaung-payapwal* festivals. Actually, this festival is only a decade old as it has officially begun in 2011<sup>23</sup>. From that year onwards, the festival has been organized regularly as a part of the bigger Shwe U Min pagoda festival known as *Tabaungpayapwal* or *Tabaungpwaltaw*.<sup>24</sup>

The focal point of *Tabaungpwaltaw* at present is clearly religious, which is to offer donations to Shwe U Min pagoda as well as the Sangha[monastic communities] of Pindaya town. However, in old times the festival used to have a more specifically agricultural significance related to the harvest, which shifted in modern times to focus mainly on cultural and religious matters.<sup>25</sup>

I witnessed that the DSSYD festival is an event intertwined with the old *Tabaungpwaltaw*'s festival and both events are mutually interdependent. During my fieldwork I interviewed Mr. U Chit Sein the former

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<sup>21</sup> Archive of the first Danu National Conference, 2017, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Tatakpawl is one of Danu festivals held every Burmese New Year eve.

<sup>23</sup> U Nyi Lay Chan, personal communication, March 19, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Tabaung-pwal-taw is held yearly in the Burmese month of Taboung particularly to perform religious activities such as offering donations to Sangha.

<sup>25</sup> U Nyi Lay Chan, personal communication, March 19, 2019.

chair and organizer of this event, who mentioned that DSSYD is actually not a festival that is held on its own, but rather it is organized as a part of the old pagoda festival. He mentions the following reasons:

“If we tried to do this event independently, it would be impossible to make many people come because we already have many festivals in our community. Therefore, we decided to make it as part of the pagoda festival. By doing so, we did not have to worry about people’s participation. And we chose the fourth day of pagoda’s festival, which is pre-full-Moon day of this month, for the DSSYD event, because we want to perform *Tabaungpwal’s* religious activities on the whole full-Moon day”.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, Danu Son See Yar Day (the DSSYD) event can be understood as a cultural festival that has grown in the fold of the Shwe U Min pagoda religious festival. As my informant suggested, this cultural event wouldn’t have become that successful if it was not affiliated with the bigger religious festival.

***(b) what they conduct in the festival relates in one way or the other to religion.*** The main objectives of holding this festival by the organizing committee are reconstructed from my interviews and observation. Luckily, I was even given some meeting notes and handouts on the festival by one of the former organizers. According these sources, there are five major objectives that the committee aims to achieve through the DSSYD festival.<sup>27</sup>

The first objective of this festival is to organize *Sonn Taw Gyi donation*, meaning big-rice-offering to the Buddha. In Danu Buddhist tradition, there is an occasion when people gather together and donate several different kinds of foods to the Buddha statues, temples and monks. This kind of donation is called *Sonn Taw Gyi*.

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<sup>26</sup> U Chit Sein, personal communication, March 24, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Chit Sein, DLCRDA, meeting handout, 2018.

The second objective is to organize *Sonn San Sein donation*, the raw rice donation to the Sangha who are living in Pindaya region. In this event, Danu Buddhist devotees offer uncooked rice and other necessities including money to the monks and novices of *Pindaya town*.

The third objective of DSSYD organizing committee is to arrange *Sonn Kyet donation*, the cooked rice offering to all the Sangha of the town. In this event, people only offer cooked rice and curry to the receivers. Up to now, the purpose of organizing this festival is totally religious that is to make merit and to support monks and novices with foods and other necessities.

The fourth objective is to arrange the Danu dancing and singing contest for Danu teams from different parts of the country. I could observe the Danu dancing singing during my field work. Most of their cultural performance relate to religion in one way or the other.

According to U Mawneya, a Danu researcher, Danu dances can be divided mainly into two types, one is called '*Let-Chaoe-aka*', meaning dancing by shaking and moving the hands and feet, and the other is '*Thein-kueat-aka*', which is based on Danu martial arts. By dividing them further into more detailed forms, there can be altogether about 6 different Danu traditional dances. They are 1) *Ya-pout-pwal-aka*, dance performed when they collect their harvests, 2) *Mee-lout-pwal-aka*, dance performed when they donate the light to Buddha statues, stupas and temples, 3) *Pann-phwar-thein-aka*, martial art dance with tassel attached swords or sticks, 4) *Pwal-san-thein-aka*, dance performed when religious or cultural ceremonies are conducted, 5) *Tatat-aka*, dance performed during the Burmese New Year Eve, during *Thin-gyan*, 6) *Mee-su-kan-aka*, dance performed for asking money from stakeholders to have a party after completing any religious or cultural ceremony.<sup>28</sup>

Should the spectator watch the performances without this background knowledge about traditional Danu dancing, all the dances may look very similar, but their subtle differences and deeper meaning appear

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28 Mawneya, 2002, 65

only upon a careful observation. As Mawneya mentions, dances can be differentiated into many kinds depending on the features and the occasions in which they are performed. Nonetheless, these dances are normally found only in festivals and religious ceremonies in modern days and are no longer performed in usual occasions.

With regards to the songs, unlike popular song types such as country songs, pop, hip-hop or rock, Danu traditional songs are very unique. During the festivity participants perform what is called '*than gja*' in the Burmese language, which is more like poems rather than songs. '*Than-gja*' is defined in the KML Dictionary, an online Burmese-English Dictionary, and also in the Pyidaungsu Myanmar Mini-Encyclopedia - as an antiphonal chant usually sung with the Burmese traditional drums during festivals.<sup>29</sup> An example piece of a '*than-gja*' is presented below. I received it from the Kaung Bo<sup>30</sup> team that entered into competition and won the third prize of this year.

*“Danu-maung-mal-lu-ngal-tway  
Parahita-lout-saung-nay  
Thu-gon-tway-a-sin-lann  
Kway-hti-mwaye-tal-kha-ye-pann  
Kha-ye-pann-hay- kha-ye-pann”* (Kaung Bo Village  
'*than-gja*', handout)

I translated this piece of '*than-gja*' into English as follows:

*The honour of Danu youth,  
Who are devoted to the wellbeing of others,  
Will always be remembered,  
Like the starflower that retains its fragrance,  
Even as it withers.*

The poem is about the Danu youths' activities concerned with the welfare of human beings. The '*than-gja*' motivates the youths by praising

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<sup>29</sup> KML Dictionary, n.d; Pyidaungsu Myanmar Mini-Encyclopedia, 1998, 81

<sup>30</sup> Kaung Bo team is from Kaung Bo village in Yousouk township.

their dignity as something that will never disappear and will always be remembered by generations as the good smell never leaves the starflower even when it decays. All the '*than-gja*' are riddle-like and involve puzzle statements and meanings. This was also one of the authentic forms of Danu traditional culture which remained unknown by the whole of Myanmar until the DSSYD festival was held.

The fifth and final objective of organizing the DSSYD festival according to the organizers is to preserve and promote Danu ethnic religion and culture. This objective can be considered as the result of former objectives, since it is all about religion and culture. Whatever the Danu people conduct during this DSSYD festival is particularly related to Buddhism. Therefore, it is clear that this religious-based Danu culture is obviously playing an important role in constructing their ethnic identity.

***(d) this religious-based culture enhances connectivity and unity in the Danu society.*** Depending on what we have described, we can conclude that arranging this DSSYD festival as part of the Shwe U Min pagoda festival was an important strategic move which together with the five objectives rendered the festival doable and popular. Also, the five objectives significantly contribute to the Danu people's feeling of unity and identity. As we have seen, of all the five objectives, the first three are solely about merit making and the fourth is about their culture which is obviously based on the religion and probably important as it makes Danu people well connected and united through joint celebration of their cultural achievements. Yet, without religious activities performed in the festival, the Danu religious-based cultural practices may have less effect on their identity.

Truly, intermingling religious and cultural practices throughout the festival has produced enormous unifying effect for the ethnic identity of Danu people, which allowed them to organize the Danu National Conference (the DNC) and establish the Danu National Affairs Organization (the D.N.A.O). This is the peak achievement with regard to the administrative representation of their identity.

Moreover, by inviting different ethnicities to participate in these religious and cultural activities Danu people also could construct social harmony with diverse ethnicities in the region. One of my informants said that “even though the heading of this event read *Danu Son See Yar*; actually, this is not only for the Danu people but also for other ethnicities such as Shan, Pa’O and Taungyoe. We invite these ethnicities to participate in this event to conduct religious and cultural activities together. This, I believe, makes harmony between the Danu and other ethnicities”.<sup>31</sup> During my field-work, I witnessed that these ethnic people particularly Taungyoe people and Danu people were performing their dances and singing their songs together. Also, they were harmoniously conducting religious activities throughout the festival.

## Conclusion

In short, Danu is one of the largest ethnic groups in Shan State. But, unlike the Shan and Pa, O people, their ethnic identity is not widely known in the country due to the lack of connectivity and unity in the community. They could build a strong connection and mutual understanding with each other through the religious-based “Danu Son See Yar Day” cultural festival, where thousands of Danu gather and do religious and cultural affairs together. As a result, they could organize the Danu National Conference (the DNC) and found the Danu National Affairs Organization (the D.N.A.O) which has supreme power in the Danu ethnic community. From that moment, the ethnic identity of the Danu people became more and more visible and known to the country. In addition, by performing religious affairs and ethnic cultural dances and songs with other ethnic groups, they could also establish harmony with neighboring ethnicities.

If we look back at the Danu ethnic identity building journey, the importance of religion and culture is evident. According to the conformity of their beliefs, the Danu elders could easily persuade thousands of Danu people from different regions and build a connectivity and a unity which

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<sup>31</sup> U Nyi Lay Chan, personal communication, March 19, 2019.

lead them to all the progress of their society. Therefore, it is undeniable that the role of religion and culture in the construction of Danu ethnic identity is extremely important. Without the religious and cultural activities, they carry out during the Danu Son See Yar Day festival which unified all Danu from different regions, we could not imagine if the identity of the Danu people can be as visible as it is today.

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