

BURMESE INITIATION CEREMONIES *

BY

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Among the Burmese at the present day there exist two ceremonies, which can be described as initiation ceremonies, namely, the "Shinbyu" ceremony and the Ear-boring ceremony. The "Shinbyu" ceremony marks the occasion of the entry of a Burmese Buddhist boy into the Buddhist order of monks, and the Ear-boring ceremony marks the occasion of the boring of a Burmese girl's ears, so that she will be able to wear jewelled earrings.

Every Burmese Buddhist boy has to enter the Buddhist order of monks before he grows up to manhood. At the present day, the age of the boy going through the "Shinbyu" ceremony varies from about five years to fifteen years. As part of the ceremony, alms are offered to the monks, and friends are invited to the reception given by the parents of the boy. It is an occasion for gaiety and joy, but it is also a solemn occasion. Solemn music—usually a royal march (in Burmese music, a royal march is slow and stately)—is played. Then the boy's head is shaved, and after a recital of extracts from the scriptures the boy becomes a novice. So far as this part of the ceremony is concerned, it follows the Buddhist ceremony of initiation. When a layman becomes a Buddhist monk, a ceremony is performed, which has two parts. The first part is the initiation, on the completion of which the layman becomes a novice, and the second part is the ordination, on the completion of which the novice becomes a monk. The Burmese, therefore, have taken over the first part of the Buddhist ceremony and grafted it on their own "Shinbyu" ceremony. The second part of the ceremony is beyond the scope of the "Shinbyu" ceremony, as no person can be ordained as a Buddhist monk until he has attained the age of twenty years.

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As in the case of all Burmese ceremonies and festivals, outwardly the “Shinbyu” ceremony is a Buddhist ceremony but it also contains pre-Buddhist elements. The boy has to remain indoors and under the careful watch of his elders at least seven days before the ceremony, because it is believed that evil spirits are jealous of his approaching glory, and will attempt to cause some accident to happen to him so that he should break a bone or injure a limb which would make him hors de combat for the ceremony. Then on the morning of the ceremony, dressed in the full regalia of a prince or a king and shaded with gold umbrellas, he is put on a horse and taken in procession round the town or the village. As the procession gaily passes through the village, the young men of the village who attend on the boy during the ceremony and the procession will keep shouting the cry “Shwe”, meaning “(to be) wet”. Often the leader will shout out “May the fields be.....” and the other young men will act as the chorus and shout out “Shwe”:

“May the fields be.....”

“Wet”

“May the streams be.....”

“Wet”

“May the breasts of the boy’s mother be.....”

“Wet”

“May the breasts of the boy’s sister be.....”

“Wet”

When the procession reaches the eastern or western gate of the village, the procession stops for some five minutes, during which time the boy has to sit upright on the horse and remain still for he is being shown to the guardian-spirit of the village. Therefore, this part of the ceremony is known as “The Nat-Showing Ceremony”. The boy then returns in procession to his parents’ home. After he has been thus “officially” returned to the parents, the young men will attempt to “steal” the boy when the parents are not looking, and if successful, they will keep him hidden until the harassed parents “redeem” him by paying a small fee.

Until the annexation of the country by the British in 1886, and the resulting changes in Burmese society, the "Shinbyu" ceremony had a deep social significance. The ceremony then was performed only when the boy had attained puberty and he was fifteen or sixteen years of age. In those days, the village monastery was also the village school, and thus the boy was no stranger to the monastery at the time of the ceremony. Since he was six years old, he had been attending the monastery, learning his lessons during the day, going round the village with the monks in the morning as they "begged" for food, and playing with the other boys of the monastery in the evenings. The initiation ceremony signified that his school days were over, and thus for him it was in some ways a graduation ceremony. The village maidens had never taken any notice of him until his "Shinbyu" ceremony, but now many a maiden waited hopefully his "return from the monastery", as can be seen from the following folk-song:-

"In front of this little maiden's house,

There are one or two clumps of saththa-phu¹ flowers,

The parrots are pecking at them.

Oh, Masters Golden Parrots, please spare the flowers,

For they are meant to await the return from the monastery of my beloved,

When I shall adorn him with flowers."

After the ceremony, he remained as a novice for one or two months, and then when he became a layman again, he was a full-fledged young man. He would join the gay and merry throng of young bachelors of the village, and the village maidens would be looking askance at him. He would now be earning his own living, and his elders would encourage him to marry and set up a house. But to the young men of the village, he was still a green-horn, and he awaited with eagerness a second initiation. If the "Shinbyu" ceremony was a

Note 1: Saththaphu=Hsat-thwa-hpu=Pandanus tectorius

test of his intellect and moral character, the second initiation was a test of his courage and manliness. This second initiation was tattooing. The Burmese had two kinds of tattooing, namely tattooing for "decoration" and tattooing for "magic", that is, for physical prowess and for invulnerability. This first tattooing for the young man was merely for "decoration", and was a social necessity for him. The second tattooing, which would usually be tattooing for magical physical powers, would come later in life and by his own choice. Tattooing was a very painful process and the young man would bite his lips until blood flowed out, so that he should not cry out in pain, for should he utter a squeal or a shriek, it would be greeted with loud laughter on the part of his companions, and for days after, he would be the butt of their jests.

Why is the boy in the "Shinbyu" ceremony dressed as a king and why is he mounted on a horse? Before answering this question, we have to note that whereas mounting a horse was a common thing for a Burmese boy in the days of the kings, being dressed as a prince or king was not only unusual but generally not permitted by law. Burmese society in many ways was a class-less society with the king and his officials at the top, but the king insisted that the difference between himself and his officials on one hand and the rest of his people on the other should be clearly marked. For that reason, great emphasis was laid on the difference in dress, and the royal regalia and the robes and uniforms of his officials were given great prominence. When the king appeared before the public, he might not always come riding on a richly caparisoned elephant or horse or borne on a golden litter, and might come walking, he would be wearing the golden chains of majesty, the jewelled sword of power, and the golden shoes of royalty, and he would be in the shade of the white umbrellas and the gold umbrellas which his attendants held over his head. To wear a dress in imitation of the king's regalia and the robes of his officials was treason certain to be punished with instant death, but the boy in a "Shinbyu" ceremony and actors in a play were exempted from the operation of this law.

To return to the question, why is the boy dressed as a prince or king? The usual answer which will be given by the Burmese is that it is because the boy is following the path of purity followed by Prince Siddhartha, who forsook his luxurious life of a prince to become a monk and later the Buddha, and therefore the boy is in effect enacting the scene of Prince Siddhartha's renunciation of the world. But this explanation is merely an "after-thought" and it is meant to give a Buddhistic basis for a pre-Buddhist ceremony, just as Buddhistic explanations are given for many Burmese festivals which now seem to be Buddhistic but which originated in pre-Buddhist times.

The word "Shin" means a "monk", but it can also mean a "lord" or a "king". Of course from the way "Shin" is now spelt in Burmese, Burmese scholars will deny that it can mean a "king" and will say that it can mean only a "monk". But the spelling itself is likely to be a later innovation, and colloquially "Shin" can mean either a "monk" or a "king". The phrase "Shin-byu" means "to make a monk", but it can also mean "to make a king". The boy who is going to be initiated is called a "Shin-laung" which means "he who would be a monk", but it can also mean "he who would be a king". I have already described Burmese society as an essentially classless society. Although the king and his officials were at the top of the social structure, everyone could hope to be king one day, and as king's officers constituted a nobility by talent and not by birth, even the humblest peasant, if he had the ability, could hope to become an official of the highest rank. Burmese folk-lore is full of stories of poor boys becoming kings, and even the early chronicles mentioned instances of persons "not of the royal bone" becoming kings. In early Burmese history, kings were elected by free choice of the people, just as the village headman was elected by popular acclaim, and right up to the final fall of the Burmese kingdom in 1886, the theory was that the king ruled by choice of the people. Even after the establishment of the first Burmese Empire under King Anawrahta, we

find that the office of king could be filled by election; the great Kyansittha became king by popular acclaim, after the royal line suddenly ended with the death of King Sawlu, Anawrahta's son. Therefore, when a Burmese boy entered manhood, he was qualified even to be the king of the country. Viewed against the background of these Burmese beliefs, the royal dress of the boy of the "Shinbyu" ceremony originally was meant to symbolize the fact that the boy was going to attain maturity and manhood.

The ceremony of "showing to the nat-spirits" had its origins in pre-Buddhist times. In many villages in Upper Burma until recent times, the boy was not shown to the "Nat", but to the "Naga Dragon". Before Buddhism was made to become the official religion of the Burmese people by Anawrahta, people worshipped "Nat spirits" and "Naga Dragons" as their gods. At the eastern gate of the village were placed images of the Guardian "Nats" of the village and of the "Naga", for the worship of Nats was entwined with the worship of the "Naga". After Anawrahta, the worship of the "Naga" was abandoned, but the worship of the "Nats" remained on as an adjunct of Buddhism and perhaps also as a "necessary evil". To give way for a pagoda and a monastery to be built at the eastern gate, the image of the "Naga" was destroyed, and the images of the Guardian Nats removed to the western gate of the village. Therefore, to these fallen and forgotten gods was the boy originally meant to be shown.

The word "Shwe", which was shouted out with so much gusto by the young men during the "Shinbyu" procession, was originally a Burmese imitation of the Sanskrit word "Sri", so magically potent and auspicious to the Hindus. The Hindu astrologers who had been attendants at the Court of the Burmese kings since the early centuries of the Christian Era had used this word on all ceremonial occasions, especially at the coronation of the king. The custom of using this word doubtless soon spread far beyond the palace gates, and came to be used at the "Shinbyu" procession as an auspicious word. Hindu astrological beliefs made a

tremendous impression on the Burmese people in the early centuries, and the earliest chronicles recorded the birthday planets of the kings. The date of the "Shinbyu" ceremony was chosen only after consulting astrologers,¹ and it seemed fitting that the auspicious word should be recited repeatedly on the auspicious day. It seemed fitting also that the same magic word which was used at the coronation of a king should be used at the ceremony which marked the occasion of the boy's entry into manhood, which would qualify him to be even a king.

However, the word "Shwe" means "(to be) wet", and in the parched country of Upper Burma, the home of the early Burmese kingdoms, wetness and fertility were synonymous. The "Shinbyu" ceremony was usually, if not always, performed in the Burmese month of Tabaung (February - March),² when the harvest had been collected, the countryside had become parched, and it was hoped that enough rain would fall some nine or ten weeks later when the new growing season was due to begin. Therefore, the word "Shwe" meaning "(to be) wet" was a word of invocation and of prayer for rain, and as such it was a magic word to procure fertility. The repeated references to women's breasts.....

"May the breasts of the boy's mother be....."

"Wet"

"May the breasts of the boy's sister be....."

"Wet"

"May the breasts of the boy's mother be long and....."

"Wet"

"May the breasts of the boy's sister be long and....."

"Wet"

seem to indicate that the Shinbyu ceremony was originally regarded also as a fertility ritual.

Note 1: This is still the custom at the present day.

Note 2: This is still the practice at the present day.

Other pre-Buddhist beliefs are also to be found in the "Shinbyu" ceremony. The belief that evil spirits are liable to do bodily harm to the boy during the period of seven days before the ceremony by causing an accident to happen seems so illogical from the Buddhist viewpoint, for the boy is to enter the noble order of monks, and surely the seven day period is a time of merit and virtue during which evil spirits should be powerless and subdued. It seems that the belief originally belonged to a more primitive initiation ceremony before the advent of Buddhism. The custom of tattooing which used to come as an aftermath of the "Shinbyu" ceremony must also have been part of that more primitive initiation ceremony. The "stealing" of the boy by the young men and the payment of a fee to redeem him remind us of the payment of "stone fee" and "bed-chamber fee" in Burmese marriages; the "stone fee" is payable by the parents of the bride to the young men of the village who will throw stones at the house of the bride on the night following the marriage, until the fee is paid, and the young women of the village will stand in the way and prevent the bridegroom from entering the bridal chamber, and will even "kidnap" the bride until a small fee is paid by the bridegroom. These customs are still followed at the present day, but their primitive origins and significance are no longer known.

Since pre-historic times Burmese women have bored their ears. Burmese men also have sometimes bored their ears, but the practice was never wide-spread. The male members of the royal family usually bored their ears, and for the king, it was obligatory. In the villages, no ceremony seemed to have marked the occasion of the ear-boring of either women or men, but at the king's court, the ear-boring was accomplished only with ceremony. For the royal princesses this ceremony was compulsory, and no princess could marry until her ears had been ceremoniously bored. For the king also, the ceremony was obligatory, for the ear-boring ceremony was a necessary prelude to the ceremony of coronation. Following royal custom, in the city, the ear-boring of the daughters of richer families was a

ceremony. At the present day, ear-boring ceremonies are performed among the richer families in towns, but are almost unknown in villages. Even in towns, the ceremony is by no means obligatory. Moreover, the ear-boring ceremony is a simple ceremony; guests are invited and fed, the ears of the young maidens for whom the ceremony is being performed, are pierced with a gold needle in the presence of the guests, some elders give a few words of greeting and advice to the maidens, and the ceremony is over. There is no religious significance attached to the ear-boring ceremony.

Yet until the introduction of Buddhism as the official religion by Anawrahta, there seemed to have existed an initiation ceremony for women also. The Chronicles mentioned that young women on the eve of their marriage, had to be sent to the Ari monks, who were stated to be debased Buddhist monks, who were Buddhist only in name. They exercised this "Law of the Lord" ¹ and no woman could marry until she had been sent to the monastery of the Aris and had surrendered her virginity to them. This custom was known as the "First-Flower-Sending Ceremony", or "Sending-to-the-monastery" ceremony. This fact, given in the chronicles, has been accepted as true throughout the centuries up to the present day, but in my opinion, it was malicious political propaganda which Anawrahta had to use so that he could suppress the Aris.

The Ari monks practised magic, alchemy, and astrology, and their religion was a mixture of Buddhism of the Northern-School with Hinduism, worship of the "Naga Dragon" and the essentially native worship of the "Nat-spirits". But it is difficult to believe that they were so depraved as the chronicles would describe them to be. They did oppose Anawrahta and the purer form of Buddhism that he introduced, and he had no other course left open to him but to persecute them and to launch the only religious persecution known to Burmese history. However, the Aris had been acting as moral and religious teachers of the Burmese peoples for some centuries before the ascension to the throne of Anaw-

Note 1: "The Law of the Lord" i.e. Droit de seigneur

rahta. Chinese historical texts written about the year 800 A. D. describe a kingdom in Upper Burma, where the standard of morality among the people was high, astrology studied and practised, and whose Buddhist monasteries numbered over a hundred.¹ It was a Pyu kingdom, the Chinese texts say, but we must remember that for some centuries after the Pyus had disappeared, the Chinese continued to call the Burmese "Pyu". However, even if it were a Pyu kingdom, it will be difficult to believe that this tradition of morality and religious fervour was not passed on to the young Burmese kingdom of Pagan founded not later than 849 A. D.²

In the same Chinese texts, the following statement is made: "When they came to the age of seven, both boys and girls drop their hair and stop in a monastery, where they take refuge in the Sangha. On reaching the age of twenty, if they have not awaked to the principles of the Buddha, they let their hair grow again and become ordinary townfolk." The statement does not say whether the nuns and girl-novices had their own monasteries, but the texts would not have described the morality of the people as "high" if there were no separate monasteries. However, if there were no separate monasteries for nuns and their novices, it will be difficult to accept that statement that the girl novices were allowed to remain in the monastery beyond the age of puberty. However, although some of the details may not be correct, the statement as a whole must be accepted as substantially correct. If we then accept the statement as true, it is clear that the practice of sending young boys and girls to the monastery for a general education, followed by an initiation ceremony when they attained the age of pu-

Note 1: G. H. Luce "The Ancient Pyu" J.B.R.S. Vol. 27 1937, Page 251.

Note 2: The Chronicles state the kingdom of Pagan was founded in 107 A. D., but the city of Pagan itself was built in 847 A. D. European scholars are inclined to accept 847 A.D. as the nearer date of the founding of the kingdom, not merely of the city. It will be out of place here to enter in the controversy.

berty, was already in existence even before the days of the kingdom of Pagan. The people of Pagan doubtless continued the practice, and the phrases "sending-the-first-flower to the monastery" or "sending-to-the-monastery" merely meant the sending of young children to the monastery, and not the sending of virgins for initiation. This practice was continued also when the Aris had been replaced by the monks of Southern Buddhism, but perhaps because of the propaganda and resulting prejudice, of perhaps because the monks of Southern Buddhism were more strict in the matter of accepting even young girls in the monastery, girls were no longer sent to the monastery for their education.

From my above study of Burmese initiation ceremonies, I will venture to draw the following conclusions:-

(1) The Burmese, like many other peoples, originally had magico-religious initiation ceremonies. There were separate ceremonies for boys and girls. The ceremonies included physical tests and were barbaric and cruel, as all primitive initiation ceremonies were.

(2) Under the Ari monks of Pagan and their predecessors in the the Pyu kingdoms, the primitive initiation ceremonies were modified and given a Buddhistic colouring. There were still separate ceremonies for boys and girls.

(3) After the persecution of the Ari monks, the initiation ceremony for girls was abandoned. The ear-boring ceremony was an attempt at a substitute, but the attempt was never successful. But the "Shin-byu" ceremony was retained.

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