

THE NINE GODS¹

by

MAUNG HTIN AUNG²

The ceremony of the Nine Gods is usually held when there is sickness in the house. As in the case of all Burmese ceremonies, it begins with the issue of invitations by the head of the household to relations and friends. In villages, of course, the invitation is to the whole village. A master of ceremonies is then engaged for a fee. In villages, he is an amateur, but in towns he is a professional, and is known as the "Saya" of "the Nine-Gods Ceremony". The Burmese term "Saya" means a "Master Craftsman" and usually the craft that he practises is attached to his term of *Saya*, as for example, "Saya of the School" (a teacher), "Saya of the University", "Saya of medicine", "Saya of Magic", "Saya of Astrology", "Saya of Carpentry", "Saya of Masonry", "Saya of Pot-Making", "Saya of Machines", etc. That there should be a "Saya" to perform the ceremony of the Nine Gods is interesting, because Burmese Buddhist ceremonies need no priest to act as the medium between the worshipper and the worshipped, and Burmese "*phongyis*" are monks and not priests.

Invitations are issued in the morning, and the "Master" is engaged from the morning, although the ceremony will begin only in the evening. The "Master" spends the whole day in making a miniature monastery of banana stem, and in making paper umbrellas, paper flag poles with streamers, and paper prayer flags. In towns, however, the Master has a ready-made miniature monastery of wood. In the evening when darkness has fallen, the Master of the Ceremony comes to the house with all his paraphernalia, and in the front room, he sets up his monastery.

The monastery is placed at the easter end of the front room, and it is imperative that it faces due west. The cardinal points are of the utmost importance in the ceremony. The audience will be facing the monastery, and therefore facing east. The Master then sets up the images that he has brought with him. Right in the centre of the monastery, he places the image of the Buddha, and he places the images of eight of His Chief Disciples (all *Arahats*) at the cardinal points of the monastery :—

North-East Rahula	East Kodanna	South-East Ravata
North Moggallana	Centre Buddha	South Sariputta
North-West Gavampati	West Ananda	South-West Upali

1. Read on August 10, 1953, with Professor Pe Maung Tin in the Chair.

2. Rector of the University of Rangoon.

Of the eight Arahats, six are well known to all Buddhists, but two, namely, Revata and Gavampati, are not so frequently mentioned in the "Three Pitakas". Revata was said to have created by his monks while they were passing through a wilderness, and Gavampati was said to have stopped the tide to enable the Buddha and his monks to cross a river. Therefore, it was believed that these two Arahats possessed unusual supernatural powers. Gavampati seemed to have been adopted by the Burmese as their "patron saint", for the Chronicles mentioned that he took part in the foundation ceremonies of the City of Prome, Sri Ksetra. After placing these images in position, the Master of the Ceremony now sets up the figures of the planets.

Burmese astrology recognizes the seven planets, namely, Sun, Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus and Saturn. In addition, it recognizes two other planets, Rahu and Kate. All the Burmese names of the planets are borrowed from Hindu astrology, but the Burmese Rahu and Kate seem to be a little different from the Hindu Rahu and Katu. The Burmese consider them to be distinct and separate planets, but Hindu astrology considers them to be either the Dragon's Head and Tail, or the Ascending and Descending Nodes. To the Burmese, Kate is the "King" of all the planets. As with many other nations, the Burmese astrology recognizes an eight day week, Wednesday being divided into two "days"; until 6 p.m., it is Wednesday, but from 6 p.m. to midnight, it is Rahu's day. Just as the gods of Hindu Mythology ride on particular animals as their "vehicles", the nine Burmese planets have their own animal "vehicles" and are often represented by these animals as given in the following list:—

1. Sunday Planet rides on a "Galon", the Burmese name for the Pali "Garunda", a mythical bird, which is the eternal enemy of the Naga.
2. Monday Planet rides on a Tiger.
3. Tuesday Planet rides on a Lion.
4. Wednesday Planet rides on an Elephant with tusks.
5. Rahu's Planet rides on a tuskless Elephant (Tuskless elephants are believed to be more powerful than elephants with tusks).
6. Thursday Planet rides on a Rat.
7. Friday Planet rides on a Guinea Pig.
8. Saturday Planet rides on a Naga.
9. Kate Planet rides on a "Animal of Five Beauties" a mythical animal with (i) the antlers of a deer, (ii) the tusks and trunk of an elephant (iii) the mane of a lion (iv) the body of a Naga, and (v) the tail of a fish.

The figures now being set are those of the gods of the planets astride their animals.

The Master places the figures of the Kate Planet in the centre of the monastery but behind the Buddha. The other eight planets have their cardinal points and each is placed behind an Arahats thus :—

North-East Sunday Sun	East Monday Moon	South-East Tuesday Mars
North Friday Venus	Kate	South Wednesday (day) Mercury
North-West Wednesday (Night) Rahu	West Thursday Jupiter	South-West Saturday Saturn

From their cardinal points, and behind the Arahats, the figures of the planets face the Buddhas.

Then the Master sets up his last group of figures. They are five in number representing the Five Chief Gods, namely,

1. Thurathati
2. Sandi
3. Paramay-thwa
4. Maha-Peinne
5. Peikthano *or* Gawra-manta

All these goddesses and gods are Hindu in origin. Thurathati is the Hindu goddess Saraswati, the consort of Brahma, Sandi is Chandi, the Consort of Siva, Paramay-thwa is Siva himself, Maha-Peinne, is the Burmese name for Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, Peikthano is Vishnu, and Gawramanta is another Hindu god, whom I am unable to identify; however Peikthano and Gawramanta are two different gods, and it depends on the particular Master of the ceremony to make the choice between the two. As in the case of the eight Arahats, and the nine gods of the planets, the figures of the Hindu gods are curved in an attitude of worship, and they are set in line facing the Buddha, in front of the little monastery. Thura-thati is on the extreme left of the line, and Siva is therefore in the centre. It is to be noticed that Thurathati's consort, Brahma, is absent, and Vishnu's consort, the gentle Lakshmi is also absent.

On the roof of the miniature monastery, there float nine miniature prayer flags and nine miniature poles with streamers, and there are also nine miniature golden umbrellas. The largest prayer flag, pole with streamers and golden umbrella are above the Buddha, and the remaining eight flags, poles, and umbrellas are above the Arahats and the gods at the eight cardinal points, and they are of the same size. The five Hindu gods do not have these insignias of worship. The Master of the ceremony now places nine miniature flower-pots in position. The flower-pot placed before the Buddha is the largest, the other eight being of equal size. He then places in position nine

begging-bowls, the largest in front of the Buddha, and the remaining eight of equal size before the eight Arahats, and nine miniature plates, the largest in front of the Kate planet, and the other eight of equal size before the gods of the other planets. The flower-pots contain three kinds of flowers each, but the begging-bowls and the plates are empty. Finally he sets up nine bees-wax candles at the nine points and lights them. He then starts to recite extracts from Buddhist texts and offers special prayers on behalf of the household in particular.

By this time, the guests have arrived. They kneel before the monastery and make obeisance. The guests are served with light refreshments; in villages pickled tea and plain tea, in towns, ice-cream and cakes. It is a social occasion, and the guests chat and laugh. At about nine or ten o'clock, the guests leave, the inmates retire to their bedrooms, and the Master of the ceremony is left alone in the room, still chanting extracts from the scriptures. At mid-night, he too goes to sleep in a make-shift bed in the room.

About an hour before dawn, the inmates get up and prepare the food to be offered to the "Nine Gods". Three kinds of fruit, usually the banana, the cocoanut, and the plum, and three kinds of jam, are made ready. The rice to be offered to the Buddha and the Arahats is cooked in an earthen pot, which has been never used before, and the rice to be offered to the gods of the planets is cooked separately in another new earthen pot. At dawn the begging-bowls before the Buddha and the Arahats and the plates before the gods are filled with three kinds of fruit, three kinds of jam, and cooked rice. The Master of the ceremony first chants some extracts from Buddhist texts and offers the alms-food to the Buddha and the Arahats. Then he invokes the gods of the planets to come and accept the alms-food now being offered. He recites a particular formula of invocation for each planet, in the following orders :—

1. Sunday planet.
2. Monday planet.
3. Tuesday planet.
4. Wednesday planet.
5. Saturday planet.
6. Thursday planet.
7. Rahu planet.
8. Friday planet.
9. Kate planet.

It will be noticed that the gods of the planets are invoked in the order of the cardinal points, and that the chief planet, Kate is invoked last. After the gods of the planets have been invoked, the Master of the Ceremony remains silent for a few minutes, and then he recites the formula of dispersal.

Again for each planet, a particular formula is used, but the order is changed as follows :

1. Sunday planet.
2. Tuesday planet.
3. Saturday planet.
4. Rahu planet.
5. Monday planet.
6. Wednesday planet.
7. Thursday planet.
8. Friday planet.
9. Kate planet.

The Sunday, Tuesday, Saturday, and Rahu planets are considered by the Burmese to be Malefics, or planets with an evil influence, and the Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday planets are considered to be Benefics, or planets with a benign influence, Kate is considered to be the most powerful, and a Benefic, but as the chief planet it cannot be grouped with the other planets. Thus the four Malefics are dispersed first, then the four Benefics, and finally the Kate Planet. The formula of dispersal is really a formula of expulsion or exorcism, and the final formula ends with the conjunction, "Go back, all of you, to your several places". With this dispersal of the gods, the ceremony closes.

With all Burmese ceremonies, there is a Buddhist explanation, and a story from the "Dhammapada Commentary" is cited as the basis of the ceremony of the "The Nine Gods". A Brahman, his wife, and their little son saluted a monk, who said "Live Long" to both parents, but remained silent to the little son :—

"Said the father, "Reverend Sir, why was it that when we saluted you, you said, "Live long !" but when this boy saluted you, you said not a word ?" "Some disaster awaits this boy, Brahman." "How long will he live, Revered Sir ?" "For seven days, Brahman." "Is there any way of averting this, Reverend Sir ?" "I know of no way of averting this." "But who might know, Reverend Sir ?" "The monk Gotama ; go to him and ask him." "Were I to go there, I should be afraid because of having abandoned my austerities." "If you love your son, think not of having abandoned your austerities, but go to him and ask him."

"The Brahman went to the Teacher, and himself straightway saluted him. "Live long !" said the Teacher. When the boy's mother saluted him, he said the same. But when they made the boy salute him, he held his peace. Then the Brahman asked the Teacher the same question he had previously asked the monk, and the Teacher made the same prediction. We are told that this Brahman, not having attained omniscience, united his own wisdom with omniscience, but for all that discovered no way of averting his son's fate. The Brahman asked the Teacher, "Reverend Sir, is there no way of averting this ?" "There might be, Brahman." "What way might there be, Reverend Sir ?"

"If you erect a pavilion before the door of your house, and set a chair in the centre of it, and arrange eight or sixteen seats in a circle about it, and cause my disciples to sit therein; and if you then cause texts to be recited for the purpose of securing protection and averting evil consequences for the space of seven days uninterruptedly, in that case the danger that threatens him might be averted." "Sir Gotama, it is a perfectly easy matter to erect a pavilion and do all the rest, but how am I to obtain the services of your disciples?" "If you will do all this, I will send my disciples." "Very well, Sir Gotama."

"So the Brahman completed all of the preparations at the door of his house and then went to the Teacher. The Teacher sent the monks, and they went there and sat down, seating the boy also on a little bench. For seven nights and seven days without interruption, the monks recited the usual texts, and on the seventh day the Teacher came himself. When the Teacher came, the deities of all the worlds assembled. But a certain ogre named Avaruddhaka, who had served Vessavana for twelve years and who had received the boon, "Seven days hence you shall receive this boy," approached and stood awaiting. But when the Teacher came there, and the powerful deities gathered themselves together, and the weak deities drew back (238) stepping back twelve leagues so as to make room, then Avaruddhaka stepped back also.

"The Teacher recited the Protective Texts all night long, with the result that when the seven days had elapsed, Avaruddhaka failed to get the boy. Indeed, when the dawn of the eighth day rose, they brought the boy and caused him to make obeisance to the Teacher. Said the Teacher, "Live long!" "Sir Gotama, how long will the boy live?" "For a hundred and twenty years, Brahman." So they gave him the name of Lad-whose-years-increased, Ayuvaddhana." 3

That the explanation is an afterthought seems obvious. The "Dhammapada" story does mention eight or sixteen monks seated round the Buddha, but they did not sit in the form of a square but a circle. The story makes no mention of the planets. Moreover, the ceremony of "The Nine Gods" contains elements which can have no Buddhist explanation.

The full name of the ceremony means "Offering of alms food to the Nine Buddhas". It will be noticed, however, that there are only one Buddha and eight "Arahats". "Phaya", the Burmese word for "Buddha" can never be applied to a monk, even if he be an Arahāt but before the introduction of Buddhism it could probably mean a "god", and therefore the real meaning of the Burmese word "Phaya-kozu" would seem to be "The Nine Gods". If that is so, the "Nine Gods" must mean the nine planets, and in the ceremony, actually the gods of the nine planets are being worshipped, although that fact is hidden underneath a coating of Buddhism. In the ceremony, no special prayers of scriptures are prescribed for the worship and offering of alms food to the Buddha and the eight Arahats, and the Master of the Ceremony chooses the prayers and the scriptures at his discretion, but

3. Burlingame. "Buddhist Legends" Part II (Harvard Oriental Series).

certain set formulas of worship and offering for the nine planets are prescribed, and the Master of the Ceremony must recite those particular formulas. The Buddha and the Arahats are never invoked nor dispersed, but the nine gods are not only invoked but carefully dispersed. That the ceremony has Hindu origins is illustrated by the presence of the figures of the five Hindu gods and goddesses, although no prayers nor offerings are made to them, and by the fact that the alms-food offered does not include any meat. To the more devout Master of the ceremony, the combination of the worship of the Buddha and the Arahats on the one hand, and that of the planets on the other, seems so incongruous, that occasionally one finds such a Master using a miniature monastery for the Buddha and the Arahats, and a miniature one-roomed house for the planets, and he calls the monastery "the Buddha's Monastery" and the house "the Planets' House".

Hindu Astrology was known and practised in Burma before 1044 A.D., and the chronicles tell of two reforms of the Burmese Calendar in A.D. 78 and 640 A.D. according to astrological predictions and requirements. Even at the present day, Hindu astrology necessarily modified by Burmese beliefs still holds sway in the mind of the average Burmese, who often consults a professional astrologer. The basic belief of Burmese astrology is that the planets, except Kate, mould a man's fate. The planet of a man's birthday will be the main guardian of his fate, but at each particular period of a man's life, a particular planet throws upon him its baneful or its beneficial influence. For example, at one period of his life, he will be under the influence of Saturn, and ill-fortune will befall him, but at another period he will be under the influence of Venus, and good fortune will result. Thus the ebb and flow of a man's fortune depends on the paths in the sky of the planets. The Burmese chronicles always mention the particular day of the week on which a king was born, and until the last two decades, the name of a Burmese indicated upon which day of the week he was born. The letters of the Burmese alphabet are divided up between the eight planets thus—

Ka, kha, ga, gha, nga	— Monday
Sa, hsa, za, zha, nya	— Tuesday
Ta, hta, da, dha, na	— Saturday
Pa, hpa, ba, bha, ma	— Thursday
La, wa,	— Wednesday
Ya, Ra	— Rahu's day
Tha, ha	— Friday
Ah,	— Sunday.

And on this division, a person's name was chosen. Thus, the first name of a Saturday born would begin with one of the following letters.

ta, hta, da, dha, na

as for example, "Tin", "Htin", "Nan". This custom of naming a person after his birthday planet has now fallen into disuse, except in "old-fashioned" families.

The Burmese pagodas, like the ceremony of the "Nine Gods" retains under a Buddhistic colouring, the cult of the planet-gods. The eight cardinal points round a pagoda are named after the planets, and the terms east, west, north, south, south-east, south-west, north-east, and north-west are never used to refer to the various points of the pagoda, and instead the following terms are used :—

- The Sunday Corner (North-East)
- The Monday Corner (East)
- The Tuesday Corner (South-East)
- The Wednesday Corner (South)
- The Saturday Corner (South-West)
- The Thursday Corner (West)
- The Rahu Corner (North-West)
- The Friday Corner (North).

A person who has been told by the astrologer that he is under the baneful influence of a "Malefic", offers special prayers at the "corner" of that particular planet. He will also offer special prayers at the "corner" of his own birthday planet. It will be noticed that the Kate planet is absent. The original reason for this can only be guessed. Perhaps it was found difficult to put the Kate planet right in the centre, or perhaps as the fortunes of a man never fell directly under this planet's influence, no special prayers to the Kate planet were considered necessary. Each of this eight "corners" of the pagoda has a sign, which depicts not the particular god astride his animal, but the animal itself.

All the above facts will indicate that there existed a magico-religious cult connected with the worship of the planets, before Buddhism became the official religion of the Burmese. A Chinese Chronicle of the 9th Century, the *Man-Shu* mentioned the presence in Burma of "many fortune tellers and astrologers"⁴. The cult was of course Hindu in origin, but whether it was super-imposed on an existing native cult is a matter for consideration. Leaving aside the mythical and composite animal that the Kate Planet rides, the animals ridden by the other eight gods are real animals to the Burmese mind. Although the Naga and the Galon are mythical animals, the average Burmese villager still believes that they are real animals living in the depths of the forests of Burma. The conception of these animal-vehicles of the planets, is definitely not Hindu but Burmese in origin. It has been noted that the signs at the eight "corners" of a pagoda depict not the planet-gods but their animals. It may therefore be that the cult of the nine planets took over for its support an existing native animal cult. Just as the Naga was worshipped, perhaps the other seven animals were once worshipped also, if not by the Burmese, at least by their primitive "ancestors". It may also be that there was a native cult connected with the mystic number nine. Of course with

4. G. H. Luce "The Ancient Pyu" J.B.R.S. Volume 27, Part 2.

most peoples of the world, nine is a mystic number, and to the Buddhist it is also a mystic number, because the Buddha has "nine special attributes". However, there is some evidence that with the Burmese, there was a definite magico-religious cult connected with that number. The Burmese word "Ko" can mean both "nine" and "to seek protection by worshipping", and the Burmese phrase "*nat-ko*" means "to offer (food) to the *nat* to get his protection". In making offerings to a *nat*, often nine candles or nine dishes of food or nine kinds of food are used. With the Ceremony of the Nine Gods, although the nine candles, the nine flower-pots, etc, can be explained away as being merely consequential to the fact that the gods were nine in number, it is to be noted that nine kinds of offering are made, leaving aside the rice, namely :

1. 3 kinds of flowers
2. 3 kinds of fruit
3. 3 kinds of jam

In addition, there were "nine districts" of Kyaukse in Upper Burma, and in these districts, even at the present day, the number nine must be avoided, as the *nats* will be angry if their special number is used by human beings. For example, if a caravan of nine carts goes on a trading venture, a dire accident will result, if one builds a house on the 9th waxing or waning of a Burmese month, disaster will follow, and if one goes out with eight companions, sorrow will result.

But whether the cult of the Nine Planets was superimposed on existing native cults or otherwise, it was definitely non-Buddhist, and all non-Buddhist religious cults, whether native or alien in origin, were suppressed after Buddhism became the official religion of the Burmese under Anawrahta. For a non-Buddhist cult to survive, it was necessary to give it a colouring of Buddhism and also to admit that the gods of the cult were inferior to the Buddha, and were supporters of the new religion. The cult of the nine planets had to bow to the new order of things. The ceremony of the Nine Planets was transformed into the joint-ceremony of the worship of the Buddha and the eight Arahats, and the worship of the Nine Planets. Admission that its gods were inferior to the Buddha and were the supporters of the new religion was made by carving the figures of the nine planets and the five gods and goddesses in an attitude of worship, and by placing them with their faces turned towards the image of the Buddha. At first, of course, there could have been no real change of heart, and in secret, the devotees at the new ceremony would be worshipping the old gods of the planets. But as centuries passed, and Buddhism gradually became firmly rooted in the life of the Burmese, the anti-Buddhist and the pre-Buddhist elements in the ceremony gradually receded to the background.

MAUNG HTIN AUNG.