

THE LORD OF THE GREAT MOUNTAIN ¹

by

Maung Htin Aung ²

Mount Popa is not very high. It is about 3000 feet in height, and it stands on a level plateau of some 800 feet. The plain on which the plateau stands itself is some 1000 feet above sea level. However, Mount Popa seems to be a great mountain, because it stands solitary, almost right in the centre of the plain of Myingyan, and it has stood sentinel, over the varying fortunes of the Burmese people, whose first settlement in the Irrawaddy valley was Kyaukse District in the Myingyan plain. It is an extinct volcano, whose subterranean fires first saw daylight some 250,000 years ago, but whose raging fires died out only in historic times. According to the Burmese chronicles, in the year 442 B.C. there was a great earthquake, and Mount Popa "rose like a cone from the plains". There is a crater at the top of the cone, but one side of the crater had been blown away during one of the volcano's many eruptions. The crater is about a mile in width and about 2000 feet deep. The presence of volcanic ash makes the soil fertile, and the high ground catches the moisture from the clouds. Therefore, while the Myingyan plain itself is parched and bare of vegetation, Mount Popa is covered with a green forest. Even at the present day, there are many flowering trees, but in ancient times, the slopes of the hill were wholly covered with flowering trees, which gave to the hill its name of "Popa" which in Sanskrit means, "Flowers". Thus to the early Burmese, it was the "mountain of flowers", and it was also the "great mountain", the "golden mountain".

Throughout human history, people of all races had pictured their gods and goddesses as living on a mountain. The Buddhists believe that their gods and goddesses live on Mount Mayu, just as the ancient Greeks believed that their gods and goddesses dwelt on Mount Olympus. In the same way, the early Burmese came to believe that Mount Popa was the home of their gods and goddesses. They came to believe also that beautiful ogresses, who lived not on flesh but on flowers, played, hide and seek in the groves of Mount Popa, and that on its slopes, there wandered magicians and alchemists in search of potent herbs and roots. In the flower-forests of the hill also, there actually lurked

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1. Read on December 13, 1954 with Professor Pe Maung Tin in the Chair.
 2. Rector of the University of Rangoon.

robbers and outlaws. Anawrahta himself, while striving to regain his father's throne usurped by another, formed his army on the slopes of Mount Popa, and Kyansittha, after the defeat of the forces of Anawrahta's son by the Peguan rebels, led the remnants of the Burmese army to Popa Hill to re-equip and re-group. Perhaps at one time the hill itself was worshipped, as separate from the gods and goddesses, and probably it was considered to be "a hallowed ground of victory" whose very touch would give success to "men of valour" in their "mighty undertakings". "Mighty men of valour" played a leading part in the early history of the kingdom of Pagan, or during that period of Burmese history, special emphasis was given to physical strength and prowess. A man could become a great official of the king's court, or a great general of the king's army, if he could prove himself to be "a mighty man of valour". The emphasis was not so much on bravery as on physical might. Anawrahta's famous generals included a mighty swimmer, a mighty runner and a mighty climber. The aim of magic and alchemy in those days was the evolution of a body which was not only invulnerable but also prodigiously strong.

The Kingdom of Pagan was in the beginning merely a cluster of 19 villages. Under King Thinlikyang, who flourished in 344-387 A.D. according to the chronicles but who possibly reigned later than these dates, the villages were united and strong enough to form themselves into a city, and thus Thiripyissaya came to be built on the bank of the river Irrawaddy. It was the forerunner of the city of Pagan. At that time, the religion of the people must have been very much similar to that form of animism now practised by the remoter hill peoples of Burma. *Nat*-spirits were worshipped all over the country but each village had its own local *nats*. It would seem that both the king and the people were looking for a *nat* which would be worshipped all over the country, and which would become a national *nat*, as different from a local *nat*. In other words, they were looking for a new religion, which would bind the various tribes of the kingdom into a nation. At that time, according to the chronicles, there was another kingdom to the north, namely the kingdom of Tagaung, and in that kingdom, there happened a great tragedy. On the outskirts of the city of Tagaung, there lived a mighty blacksmith, whose son became even mightier. This son had a perfectly proportioned body and came to be known as Mr. Handsome. Even as a young boy, Mr. Handsome was a great eater, but when he attained full manhood, it was said that he ate a

quarter-basket of rice³ at every meal. When he took over his father's smithy, he wielded two hammers; with his right hand, he held an iron hammer weighing 50 viss, and with his left hand, he held another weighing 25 viss. When Mr. Handsome worked at his smithy and when he used his hammers against the anvil, the whole city quaked and trembled. It seems obvious that this account of Mr. Handsome preserves a memory of the various earthquakes in pre-historic and historic times which occurred in North Burma especially when Popa was still active. The news of this mighty man reached the king of Tagaung, who fearing rebellion, ordered the arrest of Mr. Handsome. The blacksmith was warned in time and took to the forest. The king disappointed, now stooped to treachery. Now Mr. Handsome had a younger sister, who was very beautiful. The king raised her to be his queen, and after some months told her, "I no longer fear your brother, because he is now my brother also. Invite him to Tagaung, and I shall make him governor of the city". The sister believed the king, and sent messengers to Mr. Handsome, who soon came to Tagaung unsuspecting. But he was at once seized by the king's soldiers, and tied to a *Saga*⁴ tree on the bank of the Irrawaddy. The king together with his queen and his court now came to the scene, and the king ordered that a huge fire be lit at the feet of the helpless blacksmith. As her brother writhed in agony in the fire, the queen suddenly shook herself free from her maids of honour, and rushed into the fire to die with him. The king, who had learnt to love her, tried to save her by pulling her back by the hair. But it was too late. Only her beautiful face was saved, as the rest of her beautiful body had burnt even in that short space of time. Later on, when she was worshipped as a *nat*-spirit, this was remembered, and she was called affectionately "Golden Face". Thus the brother and sister died, and they became *nat* spirits, and made their abode on the *Saga* tree. In their anger against the treacherous king, the two spirits killed all animals and all human beings which came under the shade of the tree. The king was frightened, and ordered that the tree be cut down and the trunk floated down the river. After some days the trunk of the *Saga* tree reached the new city of Thiripyissaya, where King Thinlikaung and his people waited, for the account of the two *nat*-spirits had reached them. Here was the opportunity to establish a new religion or at least a new cult. The king's carvers soon carved out of the tree trunk images of the brother and sister, and then covered them with gold.

3. One basket of rice weighs about 70 lbs.

4. *Michelia champaca* Linn—The Indian "Champa" Tree.

It was near the time of the full moon, and according to the English calendar, it was December. The fields had been reaped, the harvest had been successfully gathered, and the people were in festive mood. The images of the two *nats* were put on golden palanquins, and attended by the king himself, they were carried along the road to Mount Popa. Red was the colour associated with *nat*-spirits, and red flags and red streamers were carried by the people taking part in the procession, and by the people who lived along the route. Every one danced and sang, and when the procession halted at villages on the way, food and toddy-wine flowed free. The procession reached the summit on Mount Popa on the full moon day, and a golden *nat*-shrine, newly constructed, awaited the two images. The images were set in the shrine with great pomp and ceremony, the king proclaimed that the village on the slope of the hill, Popa Ywa, was given as perpetual fief to the two *nat*-spirits. As spirit mediums danced in abandoned joy, hundreds of white oxen, white horses, and white goats were sacrificed to the *nat*-spirits. It was the ninth month of the Burmese year, and it seemed so propitious that the month associated with the magic number nine, should now be associated with the two *nats*. Both were now given by the king the title of "Lords of the Great Mountain", but for the brother was given the title in its Burmese-Pali form "Min Maha-Giri", "Min" in Burmese meaning "Lord", and "Maha-Giri" meaning in Pali "Great Mountain", and to the sister was given the name in its pure Burmese form, "Taunggyi-shin", "Taunggyi" meaning "Great Mountain", and "Shin" meaning "Lord". However, the sister continued to be called in affection, "Shwe-Myetnha", "Golden Face". The king further ordered that the month be renamed "Nat-Taw", or "the month of the Royal *Nats*", and fixed the full-moon Day of the month as the date of the annual festival in honour of the Popa *Nats*. The kings who followed Thinlinkyaung on the throne of Pagan continued the royal patronage of the Maha-Giri spirits, and the worship of these spirits became established as a national cult. When the city of Pagan was built in 849 A. D., the figures of the Brother and Sister were carved on the pillars of the main gate, to symbolise the fact that they were the guardian *nats* of the city and the people.

By the time Anawrahta came to the throne, various local *nats* had crystalized into a pantheon of 36 national *nats*, with Maha-Giri as the head. They were the 36 *nats* that the people in the kingdom

worshipped. Of all the pre-Buddhist cults that existed in the kingdom, Anawrahta found this the most difficult to suppress. At first he tried to suppress spirit-worship altogether. He ordered the seizure of all images of Hindu gods, and put them in a Hindu temple, which was re-named "Nat-hlaung Kyaung", or "The Monastery where all the *nats* are kept prisoner". The temple still stands at the present day. But when he turned his attention to the cult of the 36 *nats*, he found the cult too firmly imbedded in the minds of the people, and finally he decided to permit the cult to survive, but only after modifications so as to make it subsidiary to the new faith. He changed the number of spirits from 36 to 37 by adding to the list Thagya (Sakra in Pali), the king of the Buddhist gods and the guardian god of Buddhism, and he made Thagya-min (King-god Thagya) the head of the Pantheon thus replacing Ma-ha-Giri, who became No. 2 in the list. Anawrahta also set up images of the 37 *nats*, in the platform of Shwezigon pagoda that he built, saying "Let the people come to worship their old gods, and then they will discover the truth of the new faith of Buddhism". The images were depicted in an attitude of worship, and the 37 *nats* therefore were shown to be supporters of the new faith, like many other gods and goddesses guarding the great pagoda. In addition, he replaced three *nats* on the list, by the *nat*-spirits of two of his heroes whom he executed and their mother, who came to be known as the Taung-byon *nats*. This cult of the 37 *nats* has survived up to the present day, although from time to time, a few of the less important *nats* in the list were replaced by new *nats*. Anawrahta seemed to have prohibited the sacrifice of animals at the annual festival on Mount Popa, and withdrawn royal patronage from the festival.

Anawrahta's son Saw Lu, who followed him on the throne, reigned only for a short period and that short period was occupied with a bitter struggle for victory against the rebellion of the Governor of Pegu, and therefore there was no time for the continuation or otherwise of Anawrahta's religious policy. But Saw Lu's immediate successors, Kyansittha and Alaungsithu, although they were great patrons of Buddhism, and contributed greatly to the further propagation of the new faith became closely associated with the revival of the cult of the Popa *nats*.

Kyansittha, after suppressing the Pegu rebellion, followed a policy of conciliation, in contrast to the stern discipline of Anawrahta.

Anawrahta, in his three-fold task of uniting a medley of tribes into a nation, of bringing under one rule the whole geographical unit of Burma, and of replacing primitive cults by Buddhism, had to exercise a discipline which was in some ways comparable to the iron discipline introduced among his followers by Gengis Khan, the Tartar. But by Kyansittha's time, the seeds sown by Anawrahta had developed into ripened grain, and Kyansittha reaped the harvest by gentler methods. From the account of his coronation given in the contemporary Inscriptions at the pagodas he built, we could know that Kyansittha encouraged the Burmese love of feasting and merrymaking, and pre-Buddhist festivals were permitted to be revived, provided they were given a Buddhistic colouring and provided the more primitive and barbarous practices were not included in the revival. Although he himself did not give his patronage to the revival of the cult of Vishnu, he brought this cult under royal control by insisting that he was the re-incarnation of Vishnu himself. He himself was sympathetic towards the restoration of royal patronage to the cult of the Maha-Giri, but he was careful that Maha-Giri should play the role of a guardian-god of Buddhism, in addition to his ancient role of the guardian-god of the King and his peoples. But he could merely turn a blind eye to the revival of animal sacrifices at the annual Popa festival, nor could his successors to the Burmese throne suppress it until the coming of Bayinnaung some five hundred years later, who at one stroke ended forever the barbarous practice.

Kyansittha probably had a personal reason for restoring royal patronage to the cult. While re-grouping the Burmese army in the woods and ravines of Mount Popa after the defeat inflicted on Saw Lu by the Governor of Pegu, Kyansittha was assisted and advised by a strange and mysterious personage, the "Monk of Popa", or "Shin Popa". He was perhaps a Buddhist monk, but he was continuing the tradition set by the Ari monks of practising magic and alchemy, or probably an Ari monk, who was not persecuted as he supported the new faith. In any case, he seemed to have been as powerful a monk-magician as "Popa Saw Rahan", "Lord Monk of Popa", who became king of Pagan in 613 A.D., and who contributed much to the development of the cult. This new Monk of Popa performed magical rites so as to ensure victory to the defeated army, and his prestige greatly increased when victory actually came and Kyansittha became king of Pagan. Just as Kyansittha had brought the revived Vishnu cult under royal control by maintaining that he himself was a reincarna-

tion of Vishnu, he now brought the cult of Min Maha-Giri under royal control, by announcing that Shin Arahan the Primate, the *nat*, and he were companions-in-arms in a previous existence, and that Min Maha-Giri had been assisting him to gain the throne of Pagan and act as the great Patron of Buddhism. I may quote from the *Glass Palace Chronicle*.

“Likewise the Mahagiri spirit showed himself and forbade the king. Then said king Htihlaingshin, ‘If the Mahagiri spirit prayed with me of yore, why helped he me not when I was in misery?’ And the Mahagiri spirit answered: ‘O king, when Anawrahtaminsaw tied thee with a rope and thrust at thee with his spear, and by my help the blow fell on the rope that bound thee and it snapped and thou, O King, went free, who helped thee but I?’ ‘True!’ said Htihlaing Kyanzittha, ‘I knew not that the spirit helped me.’ Said the Mahagiri spirit: ‘When the battle brake in Taunghkwin and thou, O king, didst flee in the darkness of the night, who but I went before thee on a striped horse, dressed in a monitor skin, and shewed thee the way?’ ‘True’ said the king, ‘I knew not that it was the spirit’. Said the Mahagiri Spirit: ‘When thou stolest Sawlu and men pursued thee, and thou wast weary and couldst swim no longer, who but I created an islet and cried like the *myittwe* bird? Who but I, in the guise of fishermen, father and son, conveyed thee to the farther bank of Aungtha in a small tanswek boat?’ ‘True!’ said the king, ‘I knew not that it was the spirit.’⁵

At the present day, Min Maha-Giri is known as “Eindwin-Min Mahagiri”, meaning “The Lord of the Great Mountain, who is also within the House”. In every Burmese house, if no longer in the cities, at least still in the villages, a coconut is hung at the top of a house post in the front of the house, and the coconut is covered with sandalwood and perfume, with a red cloth tied around it, in the shape of a head-dress (*gaung-baung*) a Burmese male wears. The coconut is an offering to the Lord of the Great Mountain, and it is associated with the *nat* for two reasons. Coconuts, bananas and plums are fruits usually offered to the Hindu gods and the 37 *nats*, and the milk from the coconut is given to a person suffering from burns, or suffering from high fever, as it is believed that the coconut milk will bring relief to the patient. In fact, the fact that Maha-Giri as Mr. Handsome was

5. Tin & Luce: “Glass Palace Chronicle” Page 107.

burnt to death is never forgotten, and just as a coconut is acceptable to the *Nat*, a *Saga* flower is not acceptable, as Mr. Handsome was tied to a *Saga* tree when he was burnt to death, and therefore when flowers are offered to the *Nat*, the *Saga* flower is always left out. But how has the Lord of the Great Mountain become the guardian *Nat* of every Burmese household? The Burmese before Anawrahta worshipped a spirit, who was known as the "House-Guardian". A little shrine was built outside the house, but right in front of the house, and offerings of fruit and flowers were made everyday to the House-Guardian. According to a Burmese juristic tale, a man had to cut down some trees to build his house, and as a result, the spirit living in a tree found himself without an abode. The spirit sued the man for compensation, and the Court ordered that an artificial tree, namely a wooden shrine, be built in the compound of the house, and the spirit was to dwell there, receiving regular gifts of fruit and flowers. It is not known whether this tale explains the origin of the cult of the "House-Guardian", but it is definite that the cult is very old, and was known not only to the Burmese, but also to the Mons and Khmers. Even at the present day, the cult exists in Thailand. Even in the city of Bangkok, there is a little shrine in every house, but unlike, with the ancient Burmese, the shrine is a little distance from the house, although it is in the compound of the house itself. When Anawrahta suppressed the worship of spirits, the people took away the shrine, but hung coconut and other fruit to a house post as offerings to the House-Guardian, but to hide the truth, they explained to visitors that they were making the offerings to Min Maha-Giri. To give semblance to their story, they later offered only a coconut, and they tied it with a cloth of red, the colour associated specially with Min Maha-Giri and the 37 *nats*. In course of time, fiction and truth mixed, and the two gods, the House-Guardian and the Lord of the Great Mountain, merged in to one, namely "The Lord of the Great Mountain who is within the House".

MAUNG HTIN AUNG